

FIGHTING THE RIGHT WAR

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Let me start by praising the Quadrennial Defense Review. It is well written, forward looking and starts to deal with the reality of the most urgent 21st Century threat facing the United States of America. It implements the shift from “threat-based planning toward capabilities-based planning.” As a parochial subject matter expert on al Qaeda, I must confess that I do not understand this shift. My remarks will be confined to how the QDR deals with the al Qaeda or its affiliates threat rather than al Qaeda capabilities. The terrorists threatening the U.S. have shown a remarkable ability to do us a maximum of harm using the capabilities we provide them, like our airplanes or the Internet. The QDR also reads like a sales pamphlet, which would be the pride of any public relations or lobbying firm in Washington. In the process, we must ensure that salesmanship does not trump good old fashioned common sense.

Who is the enemy? At this point, the enemy consists of spontaneously self-generated, self-organized networks of friends and kin, who are radicalized collectively and collectively decide to execute terrorist operations. The boundaries of these networks are very loose, as there is no longer any initiation ceremony, and anyone who wishes to become a terrorist can become one. These loose networks have carried out operations across the globe - in Africa, in Europe, in Asia, in North America - on behalf of al Qaeda, but were not al Qaeda. Retrospectively, al Qaeda has accepted them into its ranks. The motive for these operations is to build a more just and better world, a utopia modeled on the community of the Prophet and his companions, the Salaf in Arabic. Being impatient, these idealistic young people collectively chose the shortcut of violence over more peaceful means of achieving their ends. In the mid-1990's, they explained their failure to violently overthrow their own corrupt governments (the *near enemy*) by the argument that the *far enemy* (the U.S. and Western nations) propped up the *near enemy*. So, they decided to switch strategies and use terrorism against the U.S. to expel it from their own countries, so they could then overthrow their own governments.

THE LONG WAR

The QDR appropriately refers to the war on the terrorists threatening the U.S. as the Long War (pages from the QDR will be in parentheses: 9), which, because of the patent salesmanship inherent in this document, runs of risk of becoming the Glib War of Error. Specifically, the portion of the QDR dealing with fighting the Long War lacks focus on the global war on terrorists, includes lots of irrelevant examples and arguments and mischaracterizes the enemy. It starts well: “this struggle cannot be won by military force alone, or even principally.” (9) But then, it goes on: “On any given day, nearly 350,000 men and women of the U.S. Armed Forces are deployed or stationed in approximately 130 countries. They are battle-hardened from operations over the past

four years, fighting the enemies of freedom as part of this long war.” (9) This substitutes the total of military personnel stationed and fighting overseas for military personnel actually fighting the specific terrorists threatening the U.S. There are far fewer military troops fighting the terrorists affiliated with al Qaeda. Also, there was a clever substitution of *enemies of freedom* for these terrorists. We are not fighting the many enemies of freedom, who include many of our allied local governments. *We should be fighting the terrorists themselves.* This type of muddle and facile substitution permeates the QDR and renders it dangerous as a strategy to fight the specific threat to the U.S.

Direct Approaches to Fighting the Long War

The QDR goes on to describe the two direct approaches to fighting the Long War, Afghanistan and Iraq. Indeed, both countries share this direct engagement of the enemy, but they are fundamentally opposite in the Long War. We went into Afghanistan because the terrorists were there. It was a necessary step in the Long War. However, in Iraq, this is reversed. We did not go into Iraq because terrorists threatening the U.S. were there. On the contrary, terrorists came to Iraq because we were there, not the other way around. Now, there were excellent humanitarian reasons to invade Iraq, but it was not part of the original war on the terrorists affiliated with those who perpetrated the horrors of 9/11/01. Our later presence attracted terrorist enemies to Iraq, not the other way around.

Indirect Approaches to Fighting the Long War

After brief descriptions of the above direct interventions, the QDR strongly advocates an indirect approach to the fight beyond Afghanistan and Iraq by “helping partners to police and govern their nations.” (11) The rationale is the following: “This indirect approach seeks to unbalance adversaries physically & psychologically, rather than attacking them where they are strongest or in the manner they expect to be attacked. Taking the ‘line of least resistance’ unbalances the enemy physically, exploiting subtle vulnerabilities and perceived weaknesses. Exploiting the ‘line of least expectation’ unbalances the enemy psychologically, setting the conditions for the enemy’s subsequent defeat.” (11) These metaphors simply don’t make any sense for terrorists. Aikido may be useful against a larger enemy to physically unbalance him. But to use the metaphor against a small bunch of guys who are operating in London, this does not make sense. As far as the psychological argument, I’m a board certified psychiatrist and I’m totally puzzled by this argument. How does one unbalance another person psychologically? I wish I had been able to set the conditions for my patients’ subsequent cures in my clinical practice. The QDR example of T.E. Lawrence shows that this Aikido might be appropriate for terrorists themselves to use it, but not for an army fighting them. The Combined Joint Task Force Horn of Africa in East Africa and the Trans-Sahara Counter-Terrorism Initiative (TSCTI) are two present examples of these.

Questionable Strategy

I find the above metaphorical rationale to be questionable at best. The terrorists threatening continental U.S. are located in the West – a Montreal cell plotted to blow up

LAX airport for the Millennium and a Hamburg cell organized the 9/11 operation. These young Muslims were radicalized in the West for local reasons, but acted globally. Our strategy for dealing with terrorist networks must be more specific. In countries where governments are fairly elected and control their own territory, and this is the case for most of the countries in the West, an indirect strategy should certainly prevail. For the rest, things get a little bit more complicated and the appropriate strategy should be dictated by the conditions on the ground. Strengthening and helping corrupt and unpopular governments will surely backfire and generate new terrorist enemies. It is indeed the original motivation of these terrorists. The U.S. will definitely become the *far enemy* propping up the *near enemy*. Because of the demographics involved (tyrannical cliques exploiting the masses), we will never win these fights and will simply generate more enemies against us. We should be careful not to fall into this trap of supporting and helping very unpopular, unjust and corrupt governments. Instead, we should ally ourselves with our local natural allies, consistent with core U.S. values rather than forge a pact with local devils, temporary allies of convenience. Sticking to our core values will be much better for us in the long run. Also, direct action should definitely be considered when a clear enemy target is identified and the local government is unable to destroy it. This was our strategy in Afghanistan, which turned out to be very successful. In this instance, in the Trans-Sahara Counter-Terrorism Initiative, EUCOM should consider unilaterally eliminating the well defined pocket of terrorists camping out in the middle of the Sahara desert. There are just a few dozen of them without any natural hiding place and could be eliminated in a very short action by very few Special Forces. Training local governments to do this job takes far too long and does not guarantee success or even fulfill another strategic goal of the U.S.

Humanitarian and Early Preventive Measures

The inclusion of military humanitarian and early preventive measures is based on an erroneous assumption, namely that poverty and suffering eventually cause terrorism. This cannot be further from the facts about terrorism. Throughout the modern era of terrorism, dating back from the late 19th Century, terrorists were mostly from the upper middle class. This is also true for the Salafi terrorists threatening the U.S. To think that terrorists come from poor backgrounds is to mistakenly take them at their own word. They claim that they carry out operations on behalf of their less fortunate brothers, but they themselves are certainly do not have poverty or suffering in their backgrounds. Military humanitarian actions are the right thing to do because we are human beings. The military relief efforts for tsunami victims in the Pacific basin, the earthquake victims in northern Pakistan are admirable. The military intervention in Liberia and Haiti were also right. But they had nothing to do with the Long War. Indeed, putting these humanitarian efforts within the frame of the Long War is counter-productive for it negates our core American value of altruism and gives us the appearance of cold calculating beasts, obsessed by our enemy. It cheapens our intervention and gives us a reputation of acting only out of self interest. I, for one, completely reject this type of reasoning.

Role at Home

Protection of the homeland definitely belongs within the confines of the Long War. However, while the military response to natural disasters (Hurricane Katrina, 16) is a commendable, it is completely irrelevant to the Long War. Framing it as such insults people's intelligence and their ability to distinguish the real war on terrorists and what is claimed to be the war on terrorists. In the long run, it may even erode the popular support for the war on real terrorists by making people think that these words are simply campaign slogans that politicians utter for re-election.

OPERATIONAL LESSONS LEARNED

The QDR shifts to learning from operational experiences, especially in Afghanistan and Iraq, for the war on terror.

Having the Authorities and Resources to Build Partnership Capacity

The QRD advocates shifting emphasis from performing tasks ourselves to enabling others to do so. This includes helping partners improve their ability to police themselves and govern their populations more justly and effectively. This is a worthwhile goal. Liaison relationships have been our most important tools in the fight against global Salafi terrorism. But, building partnership capacity should not be elevated into an iron-clad doctrine to be followed regardless of the situation. Whether we should take unilateral action or defer to our partners depends very much on the situation. We must be aware that our local partners' goals are often quite different from ours. Many intend to stay in power no matter what, and in the process are trying to eliminate any challenge to their unpopular government. Their method of governing may include repression and exploitation of their own population. Helping such tyrants may backfire and generate far more enemies for us than would eliminating the few that might be targeting us. In terms of lessons learned from Afghanistan, reliance on our partners depends on the situation on the ground. It worked well with the Northern Alliance in terms of capturing Kabul, but it was a disaster at Tora Bora, where much of the al Qaeda leadership was able to escape. In the latter instance, we should have either acted unilaterally or at least far more aggressively. So whether to build strong partnership with local governments in the Long War should be on a case by case basis.

Taking Early Preventive Measures

The QDR advocates taking early measures to prevent problems from becoming conflicts and conflicts from becoming crises. It cites Haiti and Liberia as examples. Such measures are excellent to take because of core American values. I strongly support them. But, let's not kid ourselves. These measures are completely irrelevant to the Long War. As mentioned before, poverty and suffering do not cause terrorism. Indeed, there was no al Qaeda presence in Haiti or Liberia.

Increasing Freedom of Action

The QDR also advocates the need to increase U.S. freedom of action and the range of options available to the United States through the building of partnership capacity and strengthening alliances to defeat terrorist networks. This is definitely a worthwhile goal, but it is not an end in itself and must be subordinated to more strategic considerations. The experience with Uzbekistan is relevant. We wisely withdrew our troops from that country when its leader carried out atrocities against its population. Appearing to support tyrants will create more enemies against the U.S. than any short term benefit in the Long War.

Shifting Cost Balances

The last prong of the operational strategy advocated in the QDR calls for minimizing U.S. costs in terms of lives and treasure, while imposing unsustainable costs on its adversary. The U.S. is doing poorly in this goal. So far the total costs in the Long War (if the costs of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq are added to lost revenue from 9/11 and the added costs of defending the homeland) may come close to a trillion dollars. On the other hand, al Qaeda's cost so far has been a few million dollars. Likewise, if the loss of American lives from the Long War are added up, they would total over 5,000 while al Qaeda might have lost a few hundred lives. However, I would argue that this is a completely wrong-headed strategy, a remnant of the Cold War mentality. The enemy does not respond to a utilitarian cost-benefit analysis. It responds to moral values, and is more than willing to die for the cause. Each death inspires hundreds of young Muslims to join the cause. It is this rational actor paradigm advocated by the RAND Corporation in the 1960's that lead to the Phoenix program in Vietnam. It was wrong then and should not be duplicated now. This type of perspective plays completely into the hands of the enemy: corruption is greed; greed is capitalism; capitalism is the U.S. This mantra summarizes the worldwide complaint against the U.S. We must fight it through our information operations and cannot afford to act in ways appearing to support the veracity of this statement.

In the spirit of this perspective, the QDR advocates imposing "costs by taking actions and making investments that complicate an adversary's decision making or promote self-defeating actions. Effective cost-imposing strategies also heighten an adversary's sense of uncertainty, potentially creating internal fissures in its leadership." (18) This statement completely misunderstands the nature of the enemy the U.S. is facing. It is not a formal unified organization, but a set of homegrown informal groups of friends and kin, very loosely connected to an ideology promulgated by al Qaeda central. These groups are seeking glory by dying for the cause. There is no cost we can impose on people desiring to die. The cause consists of a gross common ideological goal, to violently establish a Salafi utopia, but there are multiple versions of it, all co-existing peacefully on adjacent websites on the Internet. Al Qaeda is not the Comintern. It does not have a unified leadership.

This enemy must be approached through moral values, which are what inspire eager idealistic young people wanting to sacrifice themselves for a cause. Utilitarianism is simply not inspiring, and pursuit of this strategy will not only undermine our goal of defeating this enemy, but will actually strengthen the enemy instead.

Operationalizing the Strategy

The QDR advocates a four prong method to operationalize the above strategy: defeating terrorist networks; defending the homeland in depth; sharing the choices of countries at strategic crossroads; and preventing hostile states and non-state actors from acquiring or using WMD. So far, so good. However, it goes on to state: “Common to all of the focus areas is the imperative to work with other government agencies, allies and partners and, where appropriate, to help them increase their capacities and capabilities and the ability to work together... Through these partnerships, the Department can assist others in developing the wherewithal to protect their own populations and police their own territories, as well as to protect and sustain forces to promote collective security.” This argument is misguided and creates a potential pact with the devil for short term gains and long term catastrophe. This emphasis on helping partners that cannot police their own territory assumes such governments have the legitimacy of governments that can police their territory. Usually such countries are in the third world and are often corrupt and tyrannical. They exploit and repress their own population. When faced with such a choice of helping Uzbekistan, the U.S. wisely withdrew from the country. Even in our alliance with the Soviet Union during World War II, our cooperation did not extend to helping it wipe out its internal opposition. The four goals in this section are appropriate, but their implementation is fraught with danger.

Defeating Terrorist Networks

The QDR gets down to details on defeating terrorist networks. It starts with remarks that seem to be taken out of my analysis. However, it quickly veers off track. It states: “Such terrorist networks oppose globalization” (21), and spends the rest of the paragraph undermining this assertion. Al Qaeda and its violent born-gain Islamist social movement is a *global* movement, embracing the notion of a global Muslim community, the *Ummah*, and using global tools such as the Internet to spread its ideology and inspire its followers. I’m afraid that the QDR might have mistaken the Environmental Liberation Front for al Qaeda, which of course does not oppose globalization.

The next paragraph states, “They exploit poorly governed areas of the world, taking sanctuary where states lack the capacity or the will to police themselves.” Al Qaeda certainly did this during its golden age, between 1996 and 2001. This sanctuary was eliminated by the successful invasion of Afghanistan in the fall of 2001. Since then, al Qaeda has not been able to find any sanctuary anywhere, except in remote areas of the North West Frontier Province. But the real threat to the U.S. comes from urban areas, mostly in the West. Montreal was the site where Ahmed Ressam came from to launch his Millennial Plot against LAX Airport. Hamburg was the site where the leaders of the 9/11 operation came from. It is crucial for the U.S. to keep denying sanctuary to terrorist

networks for such sanctuaries are what transforms local terrorist operations into transnational ones, as seen in the 9/11 operations. The lack of such sophisticated transnational operations since then is probably due to the lack of a sanctuary, from which al Qaeda leaders can coordinate such an operation.

The next paragraph states, “the appeal of freedom is the best long-term counter to the ideology of the extremists.” Such a statement targets the wrong audience. It is directed at U.S. audiences, where appeal of freedom is high. In the Middle East, what appeals to both Muslim moderates and extremists is justice and fairness, not freedom and democracy, which have acquired very negative connotations in the past few years. All the fundamentalist parties in the Middle East are named the party of “Adl”, the party of justice. Freedom is a way to promote justice, and democracy is a way to promote fairness. What resonates locally in the Middle East is justice and fairness. We should get our vocabulary right.

Battle of arms & battle of ideas

The QDR rightly notes that the Long War is both a battle of arms and a battle of ideas. “The Department of Defense fully support efforts to counter ideology of terrorism, although most of the U.S. Government’s capabilities for this activity reside in other U.S. Government agencies and in the private sector.” (22) This is the key to winning the Long War. The strategy must be two-pronged. First, the U.S. must *discredit violence* rather than try to make Muslims love Americans. It is important to disaggregate support for terrorism from plain anti-Americanism. It is terrorism and not popularity that is the issue in the Long War, and we must not lose this focus. The second part of the strategy is to substitute a dream for young idealistic people to sacrifice themselves for. Only a dream can displace a dream. This is a hard task because the reality of life is far more messy than a utopia. The American Dream has now fallen on hard times, since we are perceived as a hypocritical bully in most of the world. We need to undermine this image, regain our credibility and recapture people’s inspiration in the American Dream.

The QDR advocates denying terrorist networks “sanctuary in both the physical and information domains.” (22) I already commented on the critical nature of doing so in the physical domain. I was surprised by the mention of the “information domain” since this involves crucial societal values about security and privacy that would need to be decided on a societal scale rather than unilaterally by the military.

Exploit our technical advantage

A surprise in the QDR is what is neglected. There is not advocacy to use our technical advantage against terrorist networks. We do have a strong advantage over them in terms of technology, but we are not using it in a way to defeat them. We need to build an actual terrorist database, not a database based on events or incidents, but on the terrorists themselves. Only by studying the terrorists, rather than simply their operations, will we be able to understand the terrorists. Such a comprehensive database would provide a baseline of who they are, how they are radicalized, how they are mobilized and

how they are motivated. We must understand the enemy, or the threat. We must go back to “threat based” rather than “capability based” planning in this war of terror. Terrorists use our capability since they don’t have much of their own. Focusing on capabilities, except of course for WMD, is mistaken. So we need this comprehensive database if we are not going to fall back into the trap of the Cold War. There is no need for modern day Kremlinologists, let’s call them “Alqaedologists”, who try to get insights about the terrorists from their websites, mysterious signs in their videos or hidden meanings in their speeches. Likely, we should not try to deduce their behavior from Muslim or Middle Eastern “culture” like our predecessors tried to deduce Communist behavior from Marxist principles. It is curious how we go back to what we have done in the past. It did not help us then and it is unlikely to help us now. With a comprehensive database, we will be able to use new promising tools, such as social network analysis and modeling to describe and analyze emergent behavior and trends. We will be able to anticipate enemy patterns and strategy, take appropriate counter-measures and hasten their defeat. The lack of exploitation of our technical advantage is a major flaw in our overall strategy in the Long War.