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JULY 2009

Editorial: The Review of the Corps and Its Mission

By public law, every 4 years the Department of Defense is required to conduct an analysis based on four essential issues: (1) what major challenges will the United States face in the next 20 years, (2) what is the strategy to meet those challenges, (3) what are the force structures and programs consistent with the threat and the strategy, and (4) what is the estimate of the level of resources necessary to implement the strategy? This review is called the Quadrennial Defense Review or QDR. In the past it has often labored mightily and brought forth a mouse. This year, based on the Secretary of Defense's guidance, the QDR will labor mightily and bring forth a lion that could devour an important Marine Corps mission.

In a 17 April speech to the Naval War College in Newport, RI, Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates said, "We have to take a hard look at where it would be necessary or sensible to launch another amphibious action again. In the 21st century how much amphibious capability do we need?" In a larger context, Secretary Gates is asking the QDR to examine whether the Armed Forces needs the capability to conduct joint forcible entry operations in the future. If the answer is that we can accept the risk of giving up that capability, then the implications could be staggering. Right off the bat the expeditionary fighting vehicle becomes an expensive luxury. In addition, we have based the requirement for a 38-ship amphibious force on providing the Marines with the capability to force their way ashore from the sea and sustain themselves for at least 30 days. If the QDR assesses that the chance of a major amphibious assault is negligible and the risk of losing that capability is acceptable, then the logical questions that follow are how many amphibious ships and landing craft do we need, and what should their capabilities be?

A robust amphibious force has the inherent ability to operate across the spectrum of warfare. That force can conduct cooperative engagement, counterinsurgency operations, and humanitarian, peacekeeping, and other military operations, such as noncombatant emergency evacuations and foreign internal defense. However, there is grave risk if that force cannot aggregate and forcibly enter a hostile location with enough combat power to prevail. Clearly the end of the warfare spectrum in the form of hybrid warfare is the most likely of the scenarios that the QDR will consider. Those scenarios are grave but not as dangerous as other scenarios at the higher end of the spectrum of warfare that can only be resolved by forcible entry and the seizure of territory to set the conditions for success. The assessments and recommendations that the QDR will make will have significant consequences for the Marine Corps as well as the Navy.

No one on the QDR has a crystal ball, but sometimes a look to the past can provide a window into the future. In 1949, when he was Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staffs, General of the Army Omar Bradley proclaimed before a congressional committee, "Large-scale amphibious operations will never again occur." If the QDR does not get the threat analysis, strategy, capability, force structure assessment, and resource allocation recommendations correct, then GEN Bradley will have proven to be way ahead of his time. The reason they will never occur again is not because they are not required for success, but because we have analyzed away the risk and given up the capability.

John Keenan