Use a Strategic Review to Drive Change

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Overview

President-elect Donald Trump clearly intends to shake up U.S. foreign policy in significant ways. It seems likely he will try to take a harder line toward both China and Iran, be more aggressive in the fight against ISIL, and significantly increase the size of the defense budget. He has signaled his desire to cooperate more with Russia, as well as his skepticism of NATO and the European Union. He has said much less publicly about other areas where there could be change, such as whether to keep U.S. military forces in Afghanistan, or what will be the broader U.S. counter-terrorism strategy.

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Issue

Achieving these goals will require that President-elect Trump and his national security team move quickly to determine where they will seek to drive change, which issues may benefit from continuity, and what will be their top national security priorities in the first year. Right now there is considerable uncertainty about President Trump’s foreign policy objectives. Whether the new administration plans to consistently state its national security goals publicly, or believes ambiguity or unpredictability can sometimes be useful, it is critical that at least within the new administration there is general agreement on the overall strategic approach. Particularly if President-elect Trump intends to return greater authority to cabinet secretaries and give them considerable autonomy to fulfill their missions, the new team must be clear on what they are trying to do and how they plan to move forward.
Since passage of the Goldwater-Nichols Act in 1986, new administrations have often used publication of a formal National Security Strategy to communicate major national security policy priorities and shifts to domestic and international audiences. Beginning with the Bottom Up Review in 1993, and continuing with the Quadrennial Defense Review, which was first required by Congress in 1996, the Department of Defense (DoD) has conducted its own major strategic review every four years to develop and articulate a defense strategy, and provide broad direction to the U.S. military services. Having personally participated in many of the NSS and QDR drills over the years, there is no doubt that the usefulness of these strategy documents and the review processes that produce them has waxed and waned. At their worse, they can be bloated, time-consuming, staff-driven processes that lead to lowest common denominator thinking. But when done well, a strategic review can help a new leadership team determine where to make shifts in strategy, what to prioritize, and where to take risk. Given the uncertainty surrounding what the new president will actually do in the national security realm, the publicly stated differences on a range of issues between Trump and his national security cabinet nominees, and the apparent potential for competing power centers within the new team, there is an urgent need to build a shared consensus on where changes will be made and how. Taking the time to conduct a lean, focused, and leader-driven strategic review would be an opportunity for the new administration to get its priorities set quickly and then use the new consensus to drive desired changes.

Recommended Changes

Whether President Trump and National Security Adviser Michael Flynn decide to make releasing a new NSS a priority in the first year, incoming Secretary James Mattis would be well served to conduct a strategic review with his senior leadership team shortly after taking office. While Congress recently did away with the requirement for a QDR, it does still require DoD to conduct a strategic review and now mandates that it be a classified document, which could actually free DoD leadership to be more hard-hitting in its articulation of strategy.

To make such a review useful, DoD should:

- **Conduct a strategy review, with direct leadership by the secretary, to develop a defense strategy by the summer or early fall of 2017.** Past experience demonstrates that strategic reviews that are genuinely prioritized by the Secretary have more impact than those that are delegated to subordinates, even senior subordinates. This does not mean that the secretary personally needs to chair weekly meetings or regularly review draft products, but it does mean he should launch the review with a clear communication of his priorities and
direction, and meet regularly with his senior leadership team to debate concepts and potential policy and resource tradeoffs as the review is underway.

• *Keep the review process small and plan to finish it in six months or less.* Most previous QDRs have been far-flung bureaucratic undertakings involving hundreds of staff across the entire department, and have generally taken almost a full year. This is not necessary or desirable. Developing a meaningful defense strategy that aligns ends, ways, and means is generally better done using a smaller group of very senior, experienced leaders who can weigh difficult tradeoffs and make hard choices rather than using multiple panels and working groups. The 2012 Defense Strategic Guidance directed by President Obama is an example of how a relatively small, very senior group of defense officials can set real priorities in a relatively short time.

• *Engage the president and his national security leadership team in the strategic review process.* At the outset of a new administration, and particularly one that appears poised to undertake very substantial policy shifts, there is tremendous value in directly engaging the president, the national security adviser, and other key senior officials in the effort to set strategic direction for DoD. While not the norm, involving the president, the NSA, and even other cabinet secretaries can lead to more meaningful prioritization of U.S. efforts in different regions of the world, and clearer decisions about how to distribute finite budget resources across the department. And finally, when the president is personally involved in the process, the decisions that are taken will have greater buy-in and more staying power.

• *Use the new defense strategy to evaluate and shape the budget submission to Congress so that it will be an engine to drive change.* DoD will probably not be able to complete a strategic review before it has to submit its first budget, potentially early this spring. But if the incoming secretary starts a small, senior leader-driven review quickly, it would be possible to at least ensure the initial budget submission reflects major key new concepts and policy shifts. Once the review is completed later this year, it can guide and shape the next iteration of the budget process more comprehensively.

Given the volume of national security challenges the country is facing, and the very mixed record of the value of past QDR efforts, it may be tempting to see conduct of a strategic review as a largely intellectual exercise that should be skipped so that leaders can focus on more pressing events. But without an up-front review to set priorities and build consensus, there is a real danger that the new administration will dilute its energy by spreading itself too thin across too wide a
range of initiatives. Without a strategic review, the chances that the new team will bounce reactively from crisis to crisis go up.

President-elect Trump frequently extols the virtues of taking a more business-like approach to government, and he is bringing in many cabinet officials from the corporate world to lead the change he seeks. Successful CEOs make sure that their employees, stakeholders, and customers understand their vision and their priorities. While the DoD is not a business, conducting a focused strategic review would enable the new secretary to clearly communicate his priorities, and those of the president, to the global DoD enterprise. This is an opportunity the secretary of defense should not miss.