

America's "War without Borders": New US Defence Strategy Envisions "Multiple Conflicts"

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Global Research, February 03, 2010

[Inter Press Service](#) 3 February 2010

Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [US NATO War Agenda](#)

WASHINGTON - A report and budget request from the U.S. Defence Department released Monday reveal both new and old priorities for President Barack Obama's Pentagon.

Strategically, the military recognises new, non-traditional threats ranging from failed states to cyber-warfare to climate change. But there is little change in the military spending habits of the Obama Pentagon versus that of his predecessor.

The new Quadrennial Defence Review, a congressionally mandated report on the direction of U.S. national security strategy, marks several major breaks from past reports. Whereas previous QDRs have had at their heart a strategy in which the country is able to fight two separate conventional wars, Monday's report shifts the focus to multiple and diffuse simultaneous threats.

"We have learned through painful experience that the wars we fight are rarely the wars we plan," Defence Secretary Robert Gates told reporters at the Pentagon Monday afternoon.

New threats require new responses, and the report emphasises having increased numbers of special forces, drones and helicopters as well as preparing for conflicts that take place in the realms of counterinsurgencies and cyberspace.

"Although it is a manmade domain, cyberspace is now as relevant a domain for DoD activities as the naturally occurring domains of land, sea, air, and space," the report notes.

The report no longer lays out just how many conflicts the military should be called on to fight.

Charles Knight, co-director of the Commonwealth Institute's Project on Defence Alternatives, sees this as problematic.

"They had never in the past defined what they meant [by a two-war strategy] but at least it had the number two in it... now you can go on forever dreaming up possible military engagement," he said.

Among the objectives of the Pentagon's strategy is the aphoristic "prevail in today's wars," which Gates noted is appearing in a QDR for the first time. "Success in wars to come will depend on success in these wars in progress," he explained.

The strategy also hopes to "prevent and deter conflict" which Gates sees as happening through increased funding for diplomacy and development since the largest future threats

will potentially come from “failed and fractured states.”

New to the report this time around is a section on preparing for climate- and energy-related challenges. Climate change will affect the DOD’s operations, the report says, citing a previous report showing how “climate-related changes are already being observed in every region of the world.”

It mentions rising sea levels, water shortages, melting Arctic ice, and extreme weather events as effects that could have geopolitical impacts.

“While climate change alone does not cause conflict, it may act as an accelerant of instability or conflict, placing a burden to respond on civilian institutions and militaries around the world. In addition, extreme weather events may lead to increased demands for defense support to civil authorities for humanitarian assistance or disaster response both within the United States and overseas,” the QDR says.

The report also lays out how the military is addressing climate-related issues, both in its own operations – in terms of reducing DOD’s reliance on fossil fuels, for instance – and in helping develop energy efficient and renewable technologies.

The Pentagon sees energy security – “assured access to reliable supplies of energy and the ability to protect and deliver sufficient energy to meet operational need” – as a strategic priority, and one which greener energy can help it secure.

Fiscal Year 2011 defense budget

This strategic planning represents the broad groundwork for the White House’s decisions on what to keep in and cut from the military budget, their proposals on which were also released Monday.

This fiscal year 2011 budget request calls for a record 708 billion dollars in defence spending. This includes 159 billion dollars for the ongoing operations in Afghanistan, Iraq and Pakistan as well as an additional 33 billion to be added onto the FY2010 budget for those operations, which had been budgeted at 129.6 billion.

The budget request would also cut funding for several major weapons programmes. The White House had also called for these cuts last year before Congress rejected them, likely due to pressure from well-funded defence contractor groups.

Monday, Gates called for an end to the “quixotic pursuit of high-tech equipment,” saying “every defence dollar spent on a programme excess to real-world military needs is a dollar not spent [elsewhere].”

The defence budget still represents an increase of 3.4 percent from FY2010, which continues a rising defence budget trend begun under President George W. Bush.

“When including war costs, Pentagon spending has grown by 70 percent in real terms since 2001,” noted the Centre for a New American Security’s Travis Sharp in a policy brief Monday.

Sharp goes on to point out that when evaluating the size of the DOD budget as a percentage

of GDP, it is lower than at most points over the past 50 years.

“Policymakers should not rely on too heavily on any single metric – whether dollars expressed in real terms or as a percentage of GDP – and thereby ignore the complexities inherent in something as unwieldy as the U.S. defence budget,” Sharp concludes.

But some see the fact that Obama has been maintaining a Bush-era level of defence spending as inherently problematic.

Miriam Pemberton, an analyst at the Institute for Policy Studies, is critical that the cuts do not go far enough.

“I think that this is a post-9/11 budget that tries to focus on asymmetric threats instead of major theatre wars, but the problem is all the procurement and hardware for major theatre war. They’ve sort of added on to the old tech instead of replacing it,” she contends. “It’s a budget of add-ons instead of choices. They haven’t made many hard choices.”

“What stands out is how little has changed from the Bush administration to the Obama administration,” Knight said.

But he does note one major shift under Obama. Speaking of the QDR, he said “the writing is much better... the ideological rhetoric is toned down, but the outcome is very, very similar. We still have the same defence policy. Basically, it’s just been dressed up in a different way.”

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