

Will America defend its Asian allies?

By Andrew Shearer
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Secretary of State Hillary Clinton used a visit to Hawaii last month to proclaim that, under the Obama administration, the United States is back in Asia to stay. Yet the fine details of the Pentagon's 2010 Quadrennial Defense Review, released this week, may not convince Asian partners that America will retain both the resolve and the capacity to maintain a decisive military edge in the region.

Superficially, there is much in the report that's reassuring. It reinforces the importance of alliances. It commits the U.S. to maintaining a forward military presence in Asia and a strong extended nuclear deterrent, while paying lip-service to the pipedream of a nuclear-free world. It focuses on rising threats in domains such as the oceans, space and cyberspace where—at least until recently—the U.S. has become used to uncontested dominance.

On specific countries, too, the QDR looks solid. Its treatment of China is measured and realistic. It recognizes the growing strategic importance of the Indian Ocean and that India's democratic values and growing military power make it an increasingly valuable strategic partner; likewise with Indonesia. And it is hard to argue against the proposition that the U.S. needs to prevail in the wars it is in: U.S. defeat in Afghanistan or Iraq would send shockwaves through Asia and beyond.

However, the devil is in the details. Commitments to maintain dominant U.S. power-projection capabilities, including new long-range strike and intelligence systems, and to make key facilities less vulnerable to attack are welcome—but there are few details about how this will be done. Welcome, too, is the focus on defeating new weapons that aim to restrict U.S. freedom of action—under development not only by Iran and North Korea but on a much more ambitious scale by Beijing. The report also highlights the importance of missile defense. Yet this does not really jibe with the Obama administration's \$1.4 billion cuts to U.S. missile-defense programs. It is difficult to see how all these capabilities will be funded given the other pressing demands on the defense budget.

There are also question marks surrounding how the U.S. is transforming its fighting forces. It makes sense to provide additional helicopters and other resources for U.S. ground forces still battling in Afghanistan and Iraq, and that the U.S. military should be prepared for a broader range of contingencies. Yet there is a risk that downplaying the traditional goal of being able to defeat two major conventional opponents simultaneously in favor of a force optimized for prevailing now in irregular warfare will see America fall short against sophisticated conventional opponents in the future. Asian allies want the U.S. to win the next war too, particularly if it is in their neighborhood.

Then there's the nuclear issue. Recognition in the report that nuclear deterrence will remain a core mission is reassuring, but it will lack credibility should the forthcoming Nuclear Posture Review err by moving to an unequivocal no-first-use doctrine, cutting the U.S. nuclear arsenal below 1,000 warheads or balking from replacing ageing U.S. warheads with a new, safe and reliable design.

America's Asian partners worry too about the rhetoric coming out of the White House, and how that matches up with the promises in the QDR. In its first year the administration leaned too far in the direction of appeasing China, soft-pedaling on human rights and other difficult issues in the hope of securing Beijing's cooperation on global warming and sanctions against Iran. The scales may be dropping from some eyes following Beijing's truculent behavior in Copenhagen and its splenetic reactions to the modest Taiwan arms package and Mr. Obama's deferred intention to meet with the Dalai Lama. But the signals are mixed.

It is hard to square the report's legitimate concern about the "lack of transparency and the nature of China's military development and decision-making processes" with reports that the administration has downgraded China as a U.S. intelligence priority. Any rolling back of U.S. surveillance operations around China's maritime periphery in response to Beijing's bluster should also be of concern to U.S. allies.

An even bigger question, though, is whether the U.S. will be able to afford the force outlined in the report: one capable of conducting stabilization operations when necessary and continuing to keep the peace in Asia into the future. Asian governments are nervous that this time around America's decline is real, and they are hedging in response. Both Australia and South Korea are building up their naval forces, for instance. It is no bad thing for U.S. allies to contribute more to international security, but a fundamental loss of confidence in the durability of American military dominance in Asia would be profoundly destabilizing.

The report will only reassure U.S. allies if they are convinced Washington will deliver on the capabilities it promises and can project power, deter aggression and come to their aid. With little evident appetite in the White House or Congress to rein in rampant domestic spending, pressures on the defense budget will only increase. Asian governments will have little option but to divert resources to acquire more sophisticated weapons. That's not good news for anyone, including America.

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