

Did the State Department Get the Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review Right?

On December 15, 2010, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton unveiled the first Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review (QDDR), billed as an ambitious effort to bolster “civilian power” and reform the State Department as well as the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). The report aims explicitly to set priorities, inform budgets, and persuade Congress to invest more in diplomacy and development. In announcing the QDDR in July 2009, Secretary Clinton evoked the Defense Department’s Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR), remarking:

I served for six years on the Armed Services Committee in the Senate. And it became very clear to me that the QDR process that the Defense Department ran was an important tool for the Defense Department to not only exercise the discipline necessary to make the hard decisions to set forth the priorities, but provided a framework that was a very convincing one to those in the Congress, that there was a plan, people knew where they were headed, and they had the priorities requested aligned with the budget, and therefore, people were often very convinced that it made good sense to do whatever the Defense Department requested. Well, I want to make the same case for diplomacy and development. . . . This will provide us with a comprehensive assessment for organizational reform and improvements to our policy, strategy, and planning processes. And this will help make our diplomacy and development work more agile, responsive, and complementary.¹

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The Washington Quarterly • 34:2 pp. 111–123
DOI: 10.1080/0163660X.2011.562135

Does the QDDR meet the goals Secretary Clinton laid out? As with the QDR, the answer hinges on how well the document assesses the strategic environment, how well the proposed plans to reshape the State Department and USAID prepare those organizations to address that environment, and whether the resources available are likely to be sufficient for that task.²

Considered on its own, the document deserves praise in several respects. First, it is full of smart, concrete changes based on a coherent analysis of a changing

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world. Second, it embraces a more proactive role for the State Department operating beyond the confines of embassies, particularly in responding to crises and conflicts, and outlines measures to prepare the department for that role. Third, it rightly focuses on reforming outdated management and human resource policies which do not support or reward diplomats and development

professionals as well as they could, and which equip the department poorly to hire and oversee contractors. To do all these things, the QDDR proposes a number of new investments and organizational changes.

Yet, the document also falls short in one principal respect. Given a political climate in which significant new resources seem unlikely, the QDDR calls for reform and investment, but sets few priorities. Instead, it calls overwhelmingly for more—more of many important and valuable initiatives, but more nonetheless. In this way, the QDDR suffers from being a product of the time in which it was launched, rather than the time in which it was finished as growing concerns over a weak economy and America's burgeoning national debt solidified into political opposition to increased government spending.

It is therefore a document about new investments when it should be a document about trade-offs.³ Unless the State Department and USAID have creative solutions or budget-allocation plans which are not evident in the document, they risk exacerbating their chronic affliction of being burdened with insufficient resources to do their jobs, failing to meet expectations as a result, and then losing the confidence of appropriators on Capitol Hill. It is time to match objectives and resources in ways that allow the use of civilian power to succeed. The QDDR achieves much that is worthy but it may not solve the perennial challenge of matching missions and resources.

Reasserting “Civilian Power”

2009–2010 should have been an auspicious time to conduct a rigorous review of the State Department and USAID, and to make the case for leading through

civilian power, a concept so central to the QDDR that it serves as the document's title. One of Barack Obama's signature foreign policy pledges as a presidential candidate was to reinvigorate U.S. diplomacy—engaging both allies and adversaries more effectively and “rebalancing” the use of civilian and military power. In Hillary Clinton, President Obama appointed a forceful personality as his Secretary of State. Both Secretary of Defense Robert Gates and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Michael Mullen have issued unprecedented pleas for Congress to invest more in civilian instruments of national security, including diplomacy and development.⁴ A wide range of reports have called for greater investment in “smart power,” “21st-century diplomacy,” or the “embassy of the future.”⁵

Unfortunately, as the QDDR was being drafted, the chance for a major new investment in civilian power deteriorated or even vanished. With a weakened U.S. economy and fears of the implications of a skyrocketing federal deficit, attaining additional resources for diplomacy and development grew increasingly unlikely. Indeed, despite a Democratic majority generally sympathetic to President Obama's foreign policy objectives, the last Congress resisted the administration's calls for more funding for international affairs, questioning the State Department's request for more resources to enable it to take over more responsibilities as the U.S. military draws down in Iraq.⁶

The 2010 election only underscored the U.S. electorate's increasing concerns about the economy, federal spending, and national debt as well as a declining interest in foreign affairs. The new chair of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, Representative Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R-FL), pledged to “work to restore fiscal discipline to foreign affairs, reform troubled programs and organizations, [and] exercise vigorous oversight to identify waste, fraud, and abuse.”⁷ These are reasonable proposals if taken at face value, but they are also viewed widely as code words for tightening the budgetary squeeze on the State Department and USAID and opposing those agencies' proposals for reform. In short, the QDDR's call to strengthen the tools of civilian power always faced a tough sell to Congress and the public, but those audiences went from skeptical to somewhat antagonistic in the face of America's anemic economic recovery and soaring debt.

A Problem with Priorities

For the most part, the QDDR correctly diagnoses the global strategic environment and both the challenges and opportunities it presents. One can always quibble, but as a general matter the QDDR's assessment coheres with the vision of the world laid out in the National Security Strategy and other Obama

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administration documents.⁸ As noted earlier, the challenge comes in establishing priorities and proposing means sufficient to ends.

The QDDR consciously elevates the importance of several strategic issues, which are outlined below. Yet, although the QDDR purports to have “made tough choices about priorities and resources”⁹ which will guide diplomacy and development in U.S. 21st-century national security policy, those trade-offs are not evident. Moreover, though the QDDR recognizes that “the United States

should not seek to shoulder the burden of confronting 21st-century challenges on our own,” it provides no guidance for how to cope with the extremely difficult problem of burden-sharing.

Adapting to an Evolving Diplomatic Landscape

The QDDR identifies several major trends reshaping the diplomatic landscape. It recognizes the diffusion of global power, as well as the continued need for strong U.S. leadership. As such, it calls for a new global architecture of cooperation to manage global challenges such as food security and nuclear proliferation which no one country can solve alone. It calls for the United States to engage emerging powers, in recognition of the rise of countries such as Brazil, China, India, and Indonesia, as well as traditional allies. It calls for the State Department and USAID to engage “non-state actors” such as corporations, non-governmental organizations, and religious groups, which are growing in influence. And it elevates public diplomacy to a “core diplomatic mission.”¹⁰

To do this, the QDDR proposes new Strategic Dialogues with emerging powers, new trilateral meetings to deepen cooperation between allies such as Japan and South Korea, and a new (and somewhat hard to grasp) “Strategic Dialogue with Civil Society.” There are a few praise-worthy efforts to reallocate resources (e.g., calling for a shift of consular services out of capital cities), but for the most part the QDDR calls for investments, not cuts or choices.

The QDDR also proposes a number of steps to strengthen public diplomacy, including the expansion of regional media hubs to better influence those who sway foreign publics, the creation of new Deputy Assistant Secretaries for public diplomacy in each of the regional bureaus, and the growth of science diplomacy programs. Again, these steps are all well-founded.¹¹ However, it is unclear if Secretary Clinton will be allocating substantial new resources to public diplomacy by cutting from other areas, and if so, from where those cuts will come. How the department will prioritize where it devotes its public diplomacy

dollars geographically is left unclear. Moreover, if public diplomacy is as important as the QDDR implies, it is not evident that the steps proposed are sufficient to the magnitude of the task. More resources may be required or ambitions may need to be scaled down.

The QDDR also emphasizes several key policy areas which have traditionally drawn less attention within the State Department: economic issues, energy, cyber security, and counterterrorism. All of these issues deserve the priority they are given. The QDDR's approach to them is largely organizational, and it is not clear what new resources will be available to support these new or expanded areas of focus. The QDDR proposes a new Chief Economist and a Bureau of Energy Resources under a new Under Secretary for Economic Growth, Energy, and the Environment; a new Coordinator for Cyber Security; and to elevate the Office of the Coordinator for Counterterrorism to a bureau.

The QDDR also proposes to establish regional embassy hubs for experts in cross-cutting issues such as climate change and conflict resolution. This is an important step toward being able to implement region-wide policies in the field, but it should be only the beginning of new efforts to go beyond the traditional bilateral constructions in which foreign policy is implemented by embassies focused on particular countries.

Elevating and Transforming Development

The QDDR elevates the role of USAID, continuing Secretary Clinton's emphasis on development as a core component of U.S. foreign policy. It delineates the roles and missions of USAID relative to State (State will lead operations in political crisis situations, while USAID will lead the response in humanitarian assistance missions). It grants USAID authority over three major aid initiatives (the Global Hunger and Food Security Initiative, the Global Health Initiative, and the Global Climate Change Initiative) and supports the process of rebuilding the agency's policy development and resource management capacities. The QDDR also makes a welcome and important commitment to science, technology, and innovation, which aim to give foreign assistance greater impact.

Noting that U.S. development "has sought to do too many things, spreading our investments across many sectors and, in the process, sometimes lessening our impact,"¹² the QDDR does highlight several key priorities such as economic growth, building governance, humanitarian assistance, food security, and health programs. But the document fails to enunciate aid's strategic purpose—namely, why does the United States distribute foreign assistance? Why are these priorities the right ones? Why must USAID be the "premier global development agency" when the rest of the QDDR emphasizes partnership with other countries and organizations?

Why does the United States distribute foreign assistance?

A key element of the report is its aim to ensure that development and diplomacy are mutually reinforcing. However, it is unclear how the administration's two signature aid programs—"Feed the Future" and the "Global Health Initiative"—relate to the country's main diplomatic goals. In these ways, the QDDR sidesteps a deep look into the very rationale for foreign aid, merely asserting that its programs

and its diplomacy are two sides of the same coin. It provides a starting point for setting priorities, but is less clear about how to select the countries and issues on which USAID will focus less attention.

Organizational Reform

The QDDR calls for extensive organizational reforms and the need to equip U.S. civilian personnel with a new array of skills and capabilities in order to keep pace with the changing demands of the 21st-century world. In this world, diplomacy and development will need to be more operational, more expeditionary, increasingly nimble, and prepared to carry out a wider variety of duties. For example, stabilization and reconstruction operations in Afghanistan and Iraq require substantially different skills and mindsets from traditional State and USAID missions.¹³

It is not clear, however, how these reforms will actually come about. If significant new resources are unlikely, the question of how to do more with the same or lower levels of resources goes unanswered. This plight is particularly evident in the report's emphasis on training. Insufficient training has long plagued the State Department, particularly in contrast to the U.S. military's vast investment in training its workforce, and the QDDR is right to call for a greater investment in its workforce's abilities to carry out a vaguely-defined array of duties. The report mentions training 118 times, calling for more for diplomats and development officers in areas as varied as economic development, democratic governance and human rights, gender integration, conflict resolution, program management, contract management, and personnel management, along with interagency training. This commitment would be a major change for organizations long known for a dearth of strong and well-funded training and professional development programs, raising questions of whether these much-needed improvements will actually have legs.

Prioritizing Women and Girls

Within each of these areas, the QDDR stresses that women and girls "should be integral to all of America's diplomatic efforts"—a commitment that no doubt

reflects Secretary Clinton's longstanding devotion to this issue. As such, the QDDR pledges that the State Department and USAID will devote more resources, direct more public diplomacy efforts, and will ensure that the role of women and girls is closely considered in planning and budgeting. This commitment is admirable and based on empirical research in the development field that investing in women and girls yields high benefits. However, the QDDR does not clarify if the State Department and USAID will focus *less* on men and boys, whose unemployment and disenfranchisement also carry risks, or if the focus on women and girls is an entirely new commitment requiring additional resources.

Responding to Crises

The strengths and weaknesses of the QDDR are particularly evident in the document's call to more effectively prevent and respond to violent conflict, weak and failing governments, and humanitarian emergencies. The issue of conflict prevention and crisis response has been a particularly contentious one for State and USAID over the past decade, with both agencies drawing significant criticism for the perceived inadequacy of their responses to the demands of intervention in Afghanistan, Iraq, and more recently Haiti. The QDDR devotes significant attention to this problem and opens with the strong assertion that "Internal violent conflict, weak or failed governance, and humanitarian emergencies in numerous states around the world have become a central security challenge for the United States."¹⁴

The State Department and USAID have strained to meet the need for more civilian experts in Iraq and Afghanistan, and though these conflicts may see a reduced U.S. commitment in the coming years, the need to build U.S. civilian capacity will continue. Though the U.S. military has stepped in to build infrastructure, create economic development initiatives, and train police in recent operations, civilian leadership would be more appropriate for three key reasons. First, the cost of civilian-led diplomacy and development is lower than major military deployments, and much expertise in these areas has typically resided in civilian organizations. Second, the U.S. military is already under tremendous strain to accomplish its own increasing array of missions, and resources are stretched thin. Lastly, the U.S. government and military have long preferred civilian leadership of activities such as judicial reform, public diplomacy, and development, since foreign populations may perceive those efforts differently if they are performed by the military.

It was therefore important to follow up a rhetorical commitment to improving prevention and response capacity with concrete steps for enhancing State and USAID leadership in this area. Yet, while the report presents a clear

understanding of the inadequacies of current State and USAID prevention and response activities, and some of the requirements for improvement, the recommendations do not present a clear strategy for moving ahead in this area and are unlikely to be fully implemented.

The State Department's initial response to the burgeoning demands for post-conflict reconstruction and other forms of relief in conflict zones was to establish the Office of the Coordinator for Reconstruction and Stabilization (S/CRS) in 2004. S/CRS was initially meant to develop and oversee a "Civilian Response Corps" to perform and coordinate critical interagency civilian deployments to, and functions within, conflict environments, but limited resources and a weak institutional position have hindered its effectiveness. In part because of its newness, the office spent a substantial amount of time building up its own capacities, rather than focusing on the coordinating function. Its poorly-defined relationship with prevention and response offices in USAID, such as the Office of Transition Initiatives (OTI), is one symptom of the broader internecine bureaucratic strife between State and USAID over the priorities and direction of U.S. foreign assistance. While S/CRS and OTI have each contributed to U.S. civilian response capabilities, such as S/CRS' emphasis on planning and OTI's demonstrated ability to respond rapidly to crises, they have not had the resources to expand their efforts or the coordination required to ensure unity of effort.

The QDDR acknowledges that State and USAID must embrace prevention and response as "a core civilian mission,"¹⁵ and its authors clearly put substantial thought into defining the wide range of missions required in weak states ridden by instability or disaster. The QDDR walks through several distinct mission sets, from "conflict prevention" encompassing diplomatic efforts to facilitate resolution of internal disputes before they become violent to "stabilization and reconstruction" involving rapid response to restore basic services and infrastructure in conflict zones.¹⁶ Within these categorizations is the necessary recognition that USAID's traditional development approaches are not necessarily the best approaches to these situations. Also important is the heavy emphasis on security and justice sector assistance, which are recognized as crucial to providing stability in weak states without having to commit major U.S. military forces. The embrace and understanding of the requirements of these missions represents a modest but significant step forward for State and USAID from only five years ago.

Understanding the problem and solving it, however, are two separate things, and the QDDR's recommendations are not entirely convincing in its solutions. The QDDR's main proposal is to rearrange the organizational structure in which S/CRS operates. S/CRS will be transformed into an Assistant Secretary-led Bureau for Conflict and Stabilization Operations (CSO) under a new Under Secretary for Civilian Security, Democracy, and Human Rights. CSO will have

the responsibility of overseeing the Civilian Response Corps (CRC) and a new “Expert Corps” that is to replace the former reserve component of the CRC (though under the new model, members of the Expert Corps will still not be obligated to deploy to overseas crises).

Theoretically, the new status better institutionalizes the office within the department, but it is not clear what the new bureau structure will do to address the chronic problems of under-resourcing and lack of empowerment that hindered S/CRS. Organizational rewiring was perhaps the easiest way to demonstrate commitment to enhancing civilian response capacity, but it is unlikely to resolve these fundamental problems. It is apparent from the QDDR that State still conceives of CSO as an S/CRS-like convener of interagency civilian response capabilities and personnel, but the QDDR does not explain how it is to coordinate anything when it remains firmly situated within the State Department’s bureaucracy and appears unlikely to be funded as if it is a real priority.

Indeed, the cold reality of limited resources suggests that there is ample reason to doubt whether the QDDR’s recommendations to improve State and USAID capacity for crisis prevention and response will move from print to reality. Like the rest of the QDDR, this section contains a number of significant-sounding calls to “expand” the CRC and its subsidiary Expert Corps and “double” the size of USAID’s Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance. To be sure, an expanded personnel base is necessary to build up a better response capacity and to allow State and USAID to send these personnel through joint training with military and international counterparts.

However, given that the talk in Washington today is focused on cost-cutting and the possibility of federal hiring freezes, these calls seem more likely to come to naught. Perhaps tellingly, the document gives little indication of concrete numbers; it does not answer the question of how much of a response capacity is sufficient for the nation’s needs. The QDDR also offers no construct for how to shape and size this response capacity beyond its calls for “more.” It would have been instructive if the review had laid out the assumptions of its authors on which categories of crisis situations or mission sets State and USAID expect to focus, or which areas of the world they view as most likely to require prevention and response capabilities to be called upon. Effectively allocating resources requires rigorous strategic vision and planning, and in this area, the State Department missed an opportunity to demonstrate either.

What Now?

Given that the QDDR identifies a number of strategic objectives and some wise investments for the future, but falls short in prioritizing and matching proposed

means to ends, what is the best route forward? To implement smart reforms, the State Department and USAID will have to adopt one of three potential paths.

First, if backed by a coalition of supporters in the Defense Department, corporations, and the non-profit community, State and USAID could redouble their efforts to build support for a greater investment in civilian power. While the political climate is not evidently hospitable to such an approach, it is nonetheless feasible to imagine a bipartisan coalition which would continue to invest in civilian power. If the administration chooses this alternative, which becomes less likely as candidates prepare for the 2012 presidential election, President Obama, senior administration officials, uniformed military leaders, and a coalition of other supportive voices would need to make a much clearer and more persuasive public case for diplomacy and development, explaining how the peace, goodwill, and economic prosperity they generate serve U.S. interests.

Second, the State Department and USAID could circumscribe their ambitions. Given the resources allocated by Congress, it may simply not be possible to achieve all of the objectives laid out in the QDDR. If that is the case, Secretary Clinton should identify the highest priority components of the QDDR, make clear what is no longer possible, and she should be clear about the costs of such a re-alignment of resources and objectives. The State Department should not try to achieve what it knows it cannot deliver, and Congress should not hold it to a higher standard than it can possibly achieve without sufficient resources. Unless this trade-off is clear, politicians may not recognize that it is lack of resources, not just inefficiency or lack of skill, that hampers the performance of U.S. civilian agencies, and that this lack of investment holds real costs for the American people.

Third, the State Department and USAID could seek creative new ways to match means to ends. Through bold leadership, streamlining operations, internal cost-cutting, and the more effective use of technology and innovative management techniques, these agencies could commit to achieving the objectives laid out in the QDDR without the prospect of significant new resources. There are many obstacles to such an approach—including bureaucratic inertia, congressionally-imposed reporting requirements and regulations, powerful interest groups, and an organizational culture that may not be ready for sweeping changes—but these could be overcome with strong, focused leadership from Secretary Clinton.

Regardless of which option the department ultimately chooses, Secretary Clinton and USAID Administrator Rajiv Shah should embark on a rigorous budget reallocation exercise, akin to Secretary Gates' recent proposal to seek internal budget efficiencies, in order to invest more in high priority modernization programs. Such an exercise at State and USAID would not only free up resources to invest in the priorities laid out in the QDDR, but also

would build confidence on Capitol Hill that new resources would be spent wisely. Such an effort should include a complete review of seemingly mundane long-held business practices, such as how frequently Foreign Service Officers and their families rotate to new posts, and centralizing administration functions such as information technology and human resources, as is done in many global corporations.¹⁷

The ultimate success of the QDDR, however, depends on its execution. Even the best departmental review is likely to come to naught unless change is constantly pushed by the secretary, the USAID administrator, and the most senior leaders of the State Department and USAID. Fostering support for change throughout the relevant agencies, the executive branch, and Congress will also facilitate success. Building support outside of government, for instance through non-profit organizations such as the U.S. Global Leadership Coalition, will also prove essential.

To be continued . . .

The most important word in the QDDR's title is "quadrennial," which carries the promise (or threat, depending on one's point of view) that the process will be repeated four years hence. Whether or not a second QDDR is initiated will depend on a number of factors, perhaps most significantly the perception of the first QDDR's success or failure. Though this inaugural effort to develop a QDDR was inevitably imperfect, it proved useful by putting a spotlight on State and USAID's need for enhanced strategic planning and their attempts to better prepare for future challenges.

The first QDDR also represents a significant step forward for the State Department and USAID if its proposed reforms to change the ways State and USAID do business can be implemented. Whether those reforms can be achieved will depend on will, skill, and the ability to gain or free up the necessary resources. The QDDR may not be perfect, but it represents a vision better than State and USAID had before. And if the State Department and USAID learn carefully from this experience, the next QDDR will be more useful still.

Much is at stake. The United States needs stronger civilian agencies to protect U.S. security, promote U.S. interests, and make the world safer, more just, and more prosperous. In conflict zones, the U.S. military has borne too much of the burden and needs stronger civilian partners. Yet, if the QDDR does

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not produce real change, the risk is that it will create disillusionment—not just with planning reviews, but with the broader effort to strengthen civilian power in support of U.S. national interests. The United States will risk entering a period of “smart power fatigue” that will only further sap the strength of the agencies upon which its foreign policy relies.

For years, a bipartisan coalition of political as well as military leaders, scholars, business people, and activists have called urgently for stronger civilian instruments of power. If such

a powerful and unified team as Secretary Clinton, Secretary Gates, and Admiral Mullen, matched by an 18-month effort to create the first QDDR, cannot make progress, it is hard to imagine—at least in the foreseeable future—how others will accomplish this urgent task.

Notes

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