Lessons for the 2014 QDDR
By Gerald Hyman
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Again, the U.S. Department of State and U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) are working on a new Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review (QDDR). It is intended to map a fresh four-year strategy for U.S. foreign policy agencies excluding the Department of Defense. The last one in 2010 was devoid of strategy: produced mostly a collection of wish lists from the various constituent bureaus and agencies; negotiated among a committee of interested parties to a common denominator that ensured no serious protests among the constituents but denied little real policy guidance to any of them; remained at a most general level; created few if any priorities; and designed nothing even remotely strategic. Worse, perhaps because it was so general and generous, it was dead on arrival at the Office of Management and Budget, at the Oval Office, and on Capitol Hill. It was orphaned even by its parents. It had no real impact, with the possible exception of its notionally unobjectionable exhortation that the agencies needed to approach their work using the resources of “the whole of government.”

The portents for the current review are not appreciably better. If anything, they are worse—if only because by the time it is drafted and then cleared by the constituents, it will (like the last one) probably be devoid of focus and cutting edge. But unlike the last one, it will arrive at the Office of Management and Budget and then the president’s desk just about the same time as the moving vans.

If it has any chance of relevance, it needs to take seriously what a real strategy is and also what it is not. A strategy is a plan for the use of resources to achieve one or more objectives in the face of adversaries, challenges, and obstacles. It is not a mere wish list for (more) resources absent the plan, objectives, and challenges to which they are to be put. So the strategy necessarily begins with an analysis of the problems for and objectives of U.S. foreign policy and the impediments to achieving them.

The diplomatic objectives for the next four years would be difficult, if not impossible, to predict fully or with much accuracy. It was somewhat easier during the Cold War. The adversary was clearer as therefore were most of the challenges. The fluidity of global affairs, the enhanced importance of nonstate actors and their shifting relations and tests is the single most complicating factor now, but there are others as well: an apparently deteriorating world order; terrorism; the dissolution of effective governance, even whole states, especially in the Middle East and South Asia; the consequent absence of clear counterparts for diplomacy; the increased urgency to attend to domestic problems, especially to rebuilding the U.S. economy and infrastructure and improving employment while reducing the budget deficit and the debt; the amplified importance of environmental and health issues as global problems that do not admit of direct negotiation between states; the rising levels of crime (internal and cross-border), of gangs, and of drug trafficking; and others. How is the secretary of state to map, let alone prioritize, with any confidence where the challenges of the next four years will come from, let alone draft a blueprint to address them? They seem to be coming from almost everywhere.

The challenges for development are less erratic, so easier to map, but not easier to tackle. With some important exceptions, the trends in Europe, East Asia, and the Western Hemisphere have been generally positive. Africa, South Asia, and the Middle East remain problematic notwithstanding the Economist’s now-dated claim that 6 of the 10 fastest growing economies are African. More important on the development side is the growth of private investment and trade and the relative dwarfing of official development assistance. Development agencies the world over, including the multilateral financial institutions, are becoming less central. USAID is no exception. No one with any real political sense believes that the huge budgets for Iraq, Afghanistan, and South Sudan will be retained and shifted from those special purposes to USAID’s general accounts. The very large growth due to those accounts is over. USAID and its universe of contractors and grantees will be on a diet absent yet another huge military or diplomatic commitment somewhere else.
The new QDDR should reflect these realities if it is to have much relevance for this administration, let alone for the succeeding one, which, like all other recent administrations, will begin with a “strategic review” of its own. Moreover, notwithstanding the difficulties, without an attempt to structure the challenges even in the face of the uncertainties, there can be no strategy. Four challenges are very clear:

1. The jihadi threat to friendly countries, to global peace and security, and perhaps even to the United States itself. The broader threat may be fundamentalism more generally, but were it peaceful, religious commitment would be a matter of choice not coercion and pose no real security threat. The place of universally recognized human rights in truly Islamist countries might well be a problem, but that would not pose a primary (as against a secondary) concern for diplomacy and development.

2. The growth and virulence of certain nonstate actors generally and the disarray in the so-called arc of instability from Tunisia east through Pakistan and from the Mediterranean south to Keduna and Plateau states in Nigeria threatens to upend the basic units of world order: functioning states. That turmoil is spreading and could easily consume the Gulf States, the main trade routes, energy resources, and Europe “new and old,” as well as Russia, Central Asia, and the Caucasus.

3. Mexico, Central America, and the Western Hemisphere have been too much neglected. These are our neighbors. Their houses are burning in Central America and parts of Mexico. Only the recent immigration of children seems to have awakened the national consciousness to the violence that threatens the state itself in Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador, notwithstanding that their gangs are U.S. exports and their drugs are U.S. imports. Large areas are scenes of open warfare among these gangs and between the gangs and the state. The writ of these national governments barely runs in them. The health and prosperity of Mexico should be among the very highest U.S. global priorities: it is our most immediate neighbor, so its problems cannot help but be ours as well.

4. China is critical but not so much because it poses a threat (notwithstanding its politically perplexing behavior in the East Asia Sea and the South China Sea). The challenge, rather, is to convince China that the United States is not trying to encircle and contain it but the opposite, that it seeks a modality for China’s constructive engagement and rightful place as a major contributor to a peaceful and prosperous world order. The attempt is to include not exclude China as a “responsible great power,” to use Foreign Minister Wang Yi’s own terms.

Russia may not be as challenging long term as it seems at the moment. Of course, its role in Ukraine needs to be dealt with. Finding a way to induce President Vladimir Putin to stop intervening in Eastern Ukraine and finding a face-saving way for him to back away, including possible constitutional changes in Ukraine, constitutes a front-burner task. But Putin’s actions in Ukraine have probably dealt a fatal blow to his ambitions for a Eurasian Union headed by Russia. Those actions have grievously harmed his fundamental aspirations. Most of the countries he is trying to woo also have significant Russian minorities and cannot be reassured by Russian imperial terms like “Novorossiya.” The question is what lesson he will take from the experience. If he is honest with himself, he will regret its long-term consequences. For the United States, it seems unlikely that Russia poses a serious military or diplomatic geopolitical threat, at least right now, unless Putin’s lesson is to become a spoiler. During all of this, the United States needs to recall the many ways in which Russia is needed for solutions to many international problems, not the least of which are terrorism, jihadism, Iran, nuclear proliferation, and a peaceful world order in general. Russia is not now a major global problem, and the United States should not make it one even as it takes convincing measures regarding Ukraine.

Iran itself is a major foreign policy problem, but long term not as profound as these others unless it “breaks out,” weaponizes its nuclear capability, and exports a nuclear arsenal. Of course, the spread of nuclear weapons and the capacity to make them is a grave concern. But it claims over and over again that it does not intend to create nuclear weapons even as it pushes forward in ways hard to explain otherwise. The problem for diplomacy is (paraphrasing President Ronald Reagan) to find a way to verify those claims and to prevent and contain the damage if the claims are false.
The challenges for USAID are too many to enumerate here, including its own internal dysfunctions, its relations with the Department of State, and its seemingly congenital inability to prioritize systematically and consistently, to think strategically (notwithstanding its promiscuous use of the term), and to find the appropriate place and policy for its developmental efforts. Unfortunately, those deficiencies have often been augmented rather than resolved by its administrators, too many of whom have arrived with a plethora of special initiatives and new programs to add onto the existing ones, along (for some of them) with plans for reorganizing the agency. USAID is not alone in weathering so many new enterprises and with a reduced budget as well, but, unlike say the Department of Defense, it is an agency that cannot seem to arrive at an enduring core mission that can be adapted somewhat to new challenges. So the real challenge for USAID is as much existential as strategic, but the QDDR is an unlikely forum to resolve such existential problems.

Of course, Secretary of State John Kerry and USAID administrator Rajiv Shah may well propose different priorities and different rationales. Based on the analysis of challenges, objectives, and strategy, the department should request resources appropriate to implement the strategies. If the resources are insufficient, the priorities and strategies will need to be adjusted accordingly: purposes may need to be trimmed; priorities rearranged; sequencing and timing adjusted. That is precisely what the QDDR should be: a coherent vision of priorities proposed by the State Department and USAID followed by a public discussion, including hearings by Congress, and then an approved plan or plans. The result should provide a road map of policies, resources, and strategy.

The point here is not to write the QDDR for the Department of State and USAID. Rather, it is to insist that if the QDDR is to have any real meaning in general and any relevance for the next administration in particular, it needs to be focused and truly not just rhetorically strategic. It needs to elucidate primary objectives and challenges, not just list all the possible problems in the world and pay politically correct homage to each of them. It needs to look realistically at the resources likely to be available to deal with its challenges and purposes. It needs to separate critical from less important or less pressing problems and intentions. Then it should set serious and meaningful priorities and plans for the use of the prospective resources to achieve its primary objectives, rather than mounting a vain appeal for resource expansion to cover all of the possible issues each constituent element of the State Department and USAID might want to invoke. That will mean leaving some things out or reducing their importance below the level of likely recourses. It will mean constructing primary, secondary, and tertiary objectives and plans. No doubt there will be disappointments both within the department and among the many nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and private companies with special causes, including their own financial sustainability. Not every NGO will find its mission rewarded with federal funds and attention.

So the question is whether the QDDR can impose some discipline, some order, over the many directions in which the State Department and USAID are pulled every day. Can it distill some strategy? What are the major challenges? What resources are needed to meet them? How would they be deployed? Would they do the job? What changes in objectives would be required with suboptimal resources? If there is no such strategic discipline, this QDDR will have no greater effect than the last one.

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