

The politics of strategy: why government agencies conduct major strategic reviews

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Abstract: In recent years, United States (US) policymakers have instituted quadrennial strategy reviews in several major policy areas. In this article, I examine why policymakers have initiated these large strategic reviews, and why a particular model for them has diffused from the US Defense Department to other government agencies. I find that policymakers have initiated the reviews principally to spur organisational change in agencies and influence the relationship between agencies and the Congress, and that policymakers have replicated the Defense Department's review model because of that department's strong political support. My findings suggest more generally that formal strategy activities are often driven more by legislative-executive and bureaucratic politics than by a search for new strategic ideas. Commonalities between the diffusion of quadrennial reviews in the US and the diffusion of other strategy and planning processes internationally underscore the broader applicability and significance of these findings.

Key words: diffusion, government agencies, national security, strategy, strategic planning

Introduction

Over the past two decades, major quadrennial strategy reviews by United States (US) federal government agencies have proliferated. This trend began in 1996 when the US Congress enacted legislation mandating that the secretary of defence conduct a quadrennial defence review (QDR) every four years. Since then, Congress or the executive branch has mandated or initiated quadrennial reviews of intelligence, homeland security, diplomacy and development, and energy policy. As detailed below, policymakers have cited the QDR as the model for these other reviews.

This diffusion of the Defense Department's (DOD's) strategic review model across large portions of the federal government is puzzling,

considering that most defence experts believe the QDR has not made a major contribution to defence strategy (Snodgrass 2000; Gordon 2005; Homolar 2011, 209–212; Gunzinger 2013, ii). In 2010, an independent panel of 20 defence experts concluded that the QDR has been an ineffective strategic planning mechanism and even recommended discontinuing the review (Quadrennial Defense Review Independent Panel 2010). More specifically, the panel concluded that QDRs have not developed new long-term visions for defence strategy or proposals for significant changes to the military's force structure or allocation of resources, but rather have generated only “explanations and justifications, often with marginal changes, of established decisions and plans” (Quadrennial Defense Review Independent Panel 2010, iii, 97).

Defence experts have generally attributed these unimpressive results to the highly bureaucratic QDR process and the QDR legislation's requirement that the QDR report be unclassified, which tend to generate lowest common denominator outcomes and rather anodyne report rhetoric (Snodgrass 2000; Gordon 2005; Center for Strategic and International Studies 2013). Jim Thomas, a participant in several QDRs, has bluntly commented: “I can't think of a worst way of making good strategy than a quadrennial defense review. Getting a couple of thousand people involved from across the bureaucracy, having lots of working groups, the coordination process, writing an unclassified document with lots of glossy pictures that you're going to put out there and you're going to pass off to your allies, as well as your enemies, as well as folks in your military and then industry, you've got too many audiences in play” (Center for Strategic and International Studies 2013). Although a few scholars have found that QDRs have had some utility in providing an impetus for individual military services to do additional strategic planning and in facilitating incremental defence policy changes (Barzelay and Campbell 2003, 80–81, 100; Tama forthcoming), most defence experts have clearly been dissatisfied with the QDR's process and outcomes.

Given this widespread dissatisfaction, it is counter-intuitive that policymakers have instituted similar strategic reviews in several other agencies in recent years. Why, then, have US policymakers established these major reviews, and why, more specifically, have they replicated the DOD's strategic review model in other agencies? These questions are worth examining, both because the design of strategic reviews may influence whether the reviews generate significant public policy changes, and because the conduct of reviews can entail substantial opportunity costs given the amount of time that government personnel spend on them. In one estimate, the DOD calculated that senior officials alone spent 6,500 person-hours on the 2006 QDR (US Senate 2006).

In this article, I seek to explain the establishment and replication of these major reviews, which have received little attention from other scholars. Conceptually, I integrate and build on insights about strategic planning and the diffusion of public policies and organisational practices from the disciplines of political science, public administration, management and sociology. Empirically, I trace the drivers of the quadrennial review model's diffusion through brief case studies of the creation of the five reviews that have been established in the US government over the past two decades.¹ These case studies feature process tracing that draws on primary sources and 26 interviews that I conducted of experts and policymakers who are very knowledgeable about the origins of the reviews. More generally, my analysis aims to enhance the understanding of the links between strategic planning processes and organisational outcomes in the public sector, which other scholars have identified as an area in need of more empirical research (Poister et al. 2010).

This article advances knowledge of the public policy process by identifying the goals that often lead policymakers to institute major strategic reviews and by explaining how and why a strategy process can spread across government agencies. The article's core argument is that legislative and executive branch policymakers have created quadrennial reviews because they have seen these reviews as useful tools of political or organisational influence. More specifically, policymakers have established the reviews principally to advance organisational change in agencies, strengthen congressional and other external support for agencies, and facilitate legislative oversight of agencies. These motivations are worth highlighting because they are not emphasised in the official mandates of quadrennial reviews, which typically centre instead on the development of a strategy in a given policy area. I also find that a network of current and former defence policymakers has diffused the quadrennial review model from the DOD to other agencies based on beliefs that it could help boost the integration, reputation, funding or oversight of agencies possessing organisational deficiencies or weak political support. I further show – in the language of diffusion scholarship, which I discuss below – that the effort to replicate the quadrennial review model has been characterised by imitation, competition and coercion more than by learning. My analysis also extends diffusion scholarship by offering one of the first assessments of the roles of both legislative and executive branches of the government in the diffusion of a policy or practice (Shipan and Volden 2012, 793).

¹ I am grateful to an official of the US Government Accountability Office for help in generating this list of quadrennial reviews by executive branch agencies.

Towards the end of the article, I broaden the analysis through a brief consideration of other efforts by US agencies and other countries to replicate DOD and US strategy or planning activities. This analysis reveals important commonalities between the diffusion of these other processes and the spread of the quadrennial review model, suggesting that a variety of government strategy and planning practices are established and replicated for similar reasons, both within the US government and internationally.

Why would policymakers establish quadrennial reviews?

In this section of the article, I draw on previous scholarship on strategic planning and diffusion in order to develop an argument and hypotheses about the creation and proliferation of government quadrennial reviews.

A range of scholarship has examined the value of formal, or highly structured, strategy activities. Although some management scholars have argued that firms are often better served by informal strategy processes, other management and public administration scholars have found that formal planning improves the performance of both firms and public agencies (Mintzberg 1994; Brews and Hunt 1999; Hendrick 2003; Brews and Purohit 2007; Bryson et al. 2009; Mintzberg et al. 2009; Bryson 2011; Poister et al. 2013). Scholars have further found that structured planning can be particularly beneficial for public organisations that are large, have many stakeholders or lack widely understood goals (Wilson 1989, 156; Kissler et al. 1998; Brews and Purohit 2007; Mintzberg et al. 2009).

Importantly, however, the value of a formal review by a government agency is likely to depend on the objectives of policymakers in a given situation. In considering whether to develop policy informally or through a more structured process, policymakers face a tradeoff between innovation and organisational buy-in. If policymakers seek the generation of innovative ideas, they may be best served by an informal process. However, if they seek to build bureaucratic support for policy or organisational changes, a formal process that allows for broad participation may be essential (Huntington 1961, 167–168). Indeed, studies of planning and reform efforts in the US Air Force and European Commission have found that leaders must engage affected personnel in order to win their support for policy or organisational changes, and that formal planning processes can facilitate such buy-in (Barzelay and Campbell 2003, 22–23; Barzelay and Jacobsen 2009, 322–327). More generally, scholars have found that the design of structured policy-making settings can help leaders exercise greater control over the policy process (Crosby and Bryson 2005, 401–426). A highly structured process may be particularly necessary to boost the integration or coordination of government agencies that are very large, complex and fragmented.

Both lawmakers and agency leaders may see strategic reviews as valuable tools for advancing the integration or co-ordination of agencies, but these sets of policymakers also often have different interests when it comes to such reviews. For agency leaders, a strategic review may serve as a useful vehicle for institutionalising priorities and asserting greater control of agency units (Destler 1974, 205; Mintzberg 1994, 351–354). Indeed, scholars have found in other contexts that the assertion of greater political control of agencies is sometimes a key driver of executive branch reform initiatives (Kellough et al. 2010; Tama 2014). In addition, agency leaders may expect that a review will boost their agency’s reputation and build support for their resource requests by signalling that the agency is well-run and following legitimate decision-making processes (Hult and Walcott 1990, 7–8, 67).

For lawmakers, on the other hand, a mandated strategic review is often attractive not only because a review might facilitate organisational change but also because a strategy document can aid legislative oversight of the executive (Light 1997, 213). This potential oversight value of formal reviews can generate significant differences in the preferences of lawmakers and executive branch officials with regard to the design of strategic reviews, even when both sets of policymakers generally see such reviews as useful. Although lawmakers will generally seek to mandate many specific requirements for reviews – in part because such requirements may boost a review’s oversight value – executive branch officials will generally want to preserve as much flexibility as possible in the conduct of a review and will, therefore, resist potentially onerous and inconvenient congressional requirements. I, therefore, expect lawmakers and senior executive branch officials to disagree frequently over the design of quadrennial reviews. Further, I expect executive branch leaders to sometimes launch a review in order to pre-empt Congress from mandating one.

Previous scholarship on the diffusion of public policies and organisational practices helps to further explain why a strategic review model might spread from one agency to other agencies. Leading scholars have defined policy diffusion as “one government’s policy choices being influenced by the choices of other governments” (Shipan and Volden 2012, 788). Political scientists have found that such diffusion is often driven by the desire of policymakers to imitate or compete with governments that are considered to be leaders or successful peers. For instance, US states and cities tend to replicate the policies of neighbouring states or larger nearby cities, and countries tend to replicate the policies of nations that are viewed as successful or culturally comparable (Walker 1969; Berry and Berry 1990; Simmons and Elkins 2004; Brooks 2005; Shipan and Volden 2008; Baybeck et al. 2011).

Public administration scholars and sociologists have generated similar findings about the diffusion of practices among public, private and nonprofit organisations, finding that organisations often seek to generate legitimacy or improve their performance by replicating the practices of organisations that are considered to be leaders or peers (Meyer and Rowan 1977; DiMaggio and Powell 1983; Strang and Soule 1998; Guler et al. 2002; Frumkin and Galaskiewicz 2004). This behaviour can result in institutional isomorphism, which refers to the adoption by organisations of similar institutional forms. Isomorphism can be a particularly appealing way to generate legitimacy for public agencies that have ambiguous goals, have difficulty measuring their performance and face significant scrutiny (DiMaggio and Powell 1983; Frumkin and Galaskiewicz 2004; Stazyk and Goerdel 2011).

With regard to strategic planning by government agencies, this scholarship implies that policymakers responsible for agencies that have weak political support or that lack clear goals or performance metrics might seek to replicate the planning activities of another agency that is prominent and highly regarded. In the US, the DOD clearly falls into the latter category, as it is not only the largest US agency, but also is politically popular and highly regarded by many policymakers. Pollsters have found that the American public views the DOD more favourably than most other federal agencies (Pew Research Center for the People & the Press 2010). In addition, despite some searing published critiques of DOD management (Luttwak 1985; Ricks 2012), many government officials and other members of the Washington, DC policy community consider the DOD generally to be relatively well-run. Former State Department official and congressional aide Charles Stevenson notes that “the Pentagon is generally recognized as having strong and effective management” (Stevenson 2006, 182). Along similar lines, former White House budget official Gordon Adams writes that “the Defense Department has maintained one of the most institutionalized and effective long-term strategic and resource planning processes in the government” (Adams 2007, 10). The case studies below provide further evidence of the high esteem in which some lawmakers and officials in other government agencies hold the DOD’s strategic planning practices.

In contrast to the DOD – to take a couple of examples of agencies that have recently instituted quadrennial reviews – the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) is rather poorly regarded by the American public, and powerful US lawmakers routinely seek to cut the State Department’s budget sharply (Pew Research Center for the People & the Press 2010; Rogin 2012). In addition, the State Department’s goals and performance are hard to define and measure, and government auditors have frequently criticised DHS’s management practices (Wilson 1989, 40; General Accountability Office 2011).

Previous scholarship on diffusion also indicates that, rather than systematically evaluating all options when making a decision, policymakers gravitate to options that are already known to them, such as options that are employed by nearby political jurisdictions or that have become familiar to them through a professional network (Walker 1969; Balla 2001; Weyland 2007; Poulsen 2014). The same logic suggests that the QDR model should be replicated first among those agencies whose work is closely connected to the DOD, and that policymakers who are personally familiar with the QDR should be the drivers of adopting the QDR model in other agencies.

These expectations might seem odd considering the QDR's poor reputation among defence experts. As the analysis below shows, however, many lawmakers and executive branch leaders have a positive perception of the review. This difference appears to exist because, although defence experts tend to assess the QDR based on its substantive contributions to defence strategy (or lack thereof), lawmakers and senior executive branch officials tend to focus on the review's political utility, while drawing inferences about the review's substantive effectiveness based on the DOD's overall reputation for relatively sound management.

Put another way, when policymakers replicate the QDR model, even though the expert community considers the QDR to be ineffective, it suggests that policymakers are imitating the DOD rather than learning from the DOD's actual experience with the QDR. Scholars of diffusion have found that policies and practices can diffuse based on several mechanisms, including learning, imitation, competition and coercion (Shipan and Volden 2008; Boushey 2012; Solingen and Börzel 2014). Learning characterises instances where policymakers adopt a policy or process because they learn that it has proven successful elsewhere. Imitation is defined by instances in which policymakers copy a policy or process because they see benefits in appearing to resemble another political actor. Competition occurs when policymakers adopt a policy or process in order to generate positive economic spillover effects. Last, coercion takes place when powerful actors impose policies or processes on others (Berry and Baybeck 2005; Shipan and Volden 2008; Boushey 2012; Klingler-Vidra and Schleifer 2014).

We can infer that learning is occurring if successful policies or practices spread more quickly or completely than less successful ones (Volden et al. 2008; Shipan and Volden 2014). Given that many experts think that the QDR has been ineffective, the creation of similar reviews in other agencies would appear to be inconsistent with a diffusion mechanism based on learning. If policymakers establishing new reviews have in fact replicated central elements of the QDR's mandate while publicly citing and praising

the QDR, this could further suggest that they are attempting to resemble the DOD in order to bolster the reputation of other agencies.

Given that an improved reputation, in turn, could help agencies garner more political support for their funding requests, agency leaders who seek to replicate the QDR may also be doing so based on a goal of competing more effectively for federal resources. The diffusion literature has highlighted economic competition among countries, states and localities as a frequent driver of diffusion (Simmons and Elkins 2004; Baybeck et al. 2011). Along similar lines, competition for funding might sometimes drive the diffusion of a policy or process across government agencies, based on an expectation that the adoption of the policy or process will make a chief executive or legislator more likely to support agency funding requests. Finally, in cases where Congress mandates the conduct of a new quadrennial review, I expect that coercion is sometimes at work, in the sense that lawmakers are mandating specific requirements for the review, even though agency leaders would prefer to maintain more flexibility regarding the review's conduct. I, therefore, expect that imitation, competition and coercion all characterise the quadrennial review model's diffusion more commonly than learning.

Summing up, the preceding argument generates the following hypotheses about the creation and diffusion of quadrennial reviews in the US government:

(H1) Lawmakers will see quadrennial reviews as useful devices for changing and overseeing agencies, whereas agency leaders will see them as useful tools for changing agencies and boosting agencies' political support and funding.

(H2) Lawmakers and agency leaders will routinely disagree over the design and mandates of quadrennial reviews, and agency leaders will sometimes launch a review to pre-empt lawmakers from ordering one.

(H3) Policymakers with defence policy backgrounds will drive the quadrennial review model's diffusion from the DOD to other agencies and will spread the model first to other national security agencies.

(H4) Policymakers creating new quadrennial reviews will praise the QDR and copy major elements of its design, rather than learning from the DOD's experience with the QDR and attempting to improve on the QDR model.

The quadrennial review model's creation and diffusion

In this section, I probe the validity of the preceding argument and hypotheses by tracing the spread of the quadrennial review model in the US government.

My analysis takes the form of qualitative case studies featuring process tracing, because process tracing is particularly well-suited to examining why and how the diffusion of a policy or practice occurs (Starke 2013). Moreover, the relatively small number of quadrennial reviews in the US government enables me to conduct process tracing of the full universe of cases. The case studies draw on a variety of primary sources, including legislative proposals, congressional hearing transcripts and statements by government officials, as well as on interviews of 26 experts and current and former congressional and executive branch officials who were directly involved in a review's establishment or are otherwise very knowledgeable about the origins of the review.² After the case studies, I summarise my findings and discuss the extent to which they support my argument and hypotheses.

The QDR

In 1996, two members of the US Senate Armed Services Committee – Democrat Joseph Lieberman and Republican Dan Coats – spearheaded the creation of the QDR. The legislation introduced by the senators, which was enacted into law in September 1996, mandates that the secretary of defence conduct a QDR that includes a comprehensive examination of defence strategy, military force structure, modernisation plans, infrastructure and other defence programmes and policies every four years (US Senate 1996). This legislation also requires that an unclassified report be given to Congress on the results of the review, including, among other things, a description of the US defence strategy and the assumptions that were used in the review.

Lieberman and Coats advanced this legislation to promote dramatic change in the DOD. The senators favoured defence reform aimed at moving the military away from its Cold War force structure, requiring the military services to operate in a more integrated manner and investing heavily in new military technologies. They were frustrated that the DOD was not making these kinds of reforms and investments and saw the QDR as a vehicle to push it to change. As Coats commented when he and Lieberman introduced the measure, “Senator Lieberman and I share the concern that the tendency to focus on immediate issues has distracted from the task of structuring the military to meet new operating environments, accommodate revolutionary changes in military technology and prepare for the possibility of entirely new kinds of threats and competitors” (Congressional Record 1996). In an

² I requested interviews with 36 such people, 26 of whom agreed to be interviewed. Twenty-one of the interviews were conducted in person; five were conducted by phone. Some interviews were conducted on a not-for-attribution basis to protect an individual's identity.

interview, a former congressional aide involved in the legislative effort added: “The [military] services were fighting to protect what they had without much realization that the world had changed”.³

Yet, Lieberman and Coats knew that the QDR might not generate major change, and thus they also included in the QDR legislation a provision establishing an independent panel with the responsibility of assessing the QDR. Fred Downey, Lieberman’s principal defence aide at the time, explained that Lieberman saw this panel as a way to prod the DOD to make changes: “Senator Lieberman knew ... that there was a non-negligible possibility that the outcome [of the QDR] would be ‘Everything is fine and dandy. We’re doing just the right things.’ So written into the legislation was the idea of having the work graded by a Team B of independent experts not invested in the status quo”.⁴ Although the DOD did not resist the QDR legislation as a whole, DOD officials opposed this independent panel requirement, arguing to congressional officials that it would be preferable to have an independent panel propose ideas to the DOD during the QDR process, rather than having a panel “grade the QDR’s homework”.⁵

The quadrennial intelligence community review (QICR)

Since the QDR’s establishment, Lieberman, Coats and other policymakers with a background in defence policy have been principally responsible for spreading the quadrennial review model to other agencies. In 1998, Coats introduced an amendment that would require the director of central intelligence, in conjunction with the secretary of defence, to conduct a quadrennial intelligence review (US Senate 1998). Closely modelled on the QDR legislation, the amendment stated that the review must include a comprehensive examination of intelligence strategy, programmes and policies, including the intelligence community’s organisation, modernisation plans, infrastructure and budget plan. The amendment also mirrored the QDR legislation in requiring the review to result in an unclassified report to Congress that describes US intelligence strategy and the review’s assumptions, among other elements, and in mandating the formation of an independent panel to assess the review.

As with the QDR legislation, Coats’ principal motivation in introducing this amendment was to promote organisational change in the executive branch. A knowledgeable former congressional aide explained: “we saw exactly the same issues in intelligence as we saw previously in defense – an

³ Interview, July 2013. (I conducted all of the interviews cited in this article. Only the month is provided for not-for-attribution interviews to further protect the identities of individuals.)

⁴ Interview, 10 June 2013.

⁵ Interview of Michèle Flournoy, 24 July 2013.

old architecture with lots of stovepipes – and there was no mechanism to do a cross-cutting assessment”.⁶ The amendment’s provisions clearly reflected Coats’ goal of fostering greater integration among intelligence agencies. For instance, the amendment mandated that the review assess whether or not current organisational divisions result in “unnecessary redundancy, significant waste, or mismanagement, and, if so, how such deficiencies could be eliminated”.

Coats’ idea faced resistance in the executive branch, however, which did not acknowledge that there existed a problem of insufficient integration, and the Senate Intelligence Committee’s leadership chose not to challenge the executive branch on the issue.⁷ Ultimately, Coats’ idea was only enacted as a non-binding “sense of Congress” measure that called on the director of central intelligence and secretary of defence to complete jointly a comprehensive review of intelligence activities every four years, but did not require such a review.

Nevertheless, the Director of Central Intelligence George Tenet took the cue from Congress and conducted a classified QICR in 2001. Tenet conducted this review principally to preempt the potential reintroduction in Congress of legislation that would set, from Tenet’s perspective, onerous and unwanted requirements for a review.⁸

After the Congress created the new position of director of national intelligence (DNI) in 2004, lawmakers again expressed support for the idea of a quadrennial intelligence review. A June 2005 report by the House Intelligence Committee argued that the DNI needed a systematic strategic planning process in order to integrate intelligence agencies, and recommended that the DNI conduct a quadrennial intelligence review, modelled on the QDR, for that purpose (US House of Representatives 2005d). Then DNI John Negroponte sought to be responsive to this advice and conducted the second and third quadrennial intelligence committee reviews in 2005 and 2009. (In 2013, DNI James Clapper chose not to conduct a fourth QICR.)

The quadrennial homeland security review (QHSR)

In 2005, the quadrennial review model began to spread from the DOD and the intelligence community to other national security agencies, as lawmakers introduced the first proposals for quadrennial reviews of homeland security and foreign affairs. The first of these proposals concerned the DHS, which had been established in 2002 through a merger of 22 preexisting

⁶ Interview, July 2013.

⁷ Interview of congressional intelligence aide, July 2013.

⁸ Interview of former intelligence community official, June 2013; interview of congressional intelligence aide, July 2013.

agencies and was struggling to build organisational cohesion (May et al. 2011; Balunis 2012). In testimony to Congress early in 2005, James Carafano, a think tank expert and former military officer, argued that a QHSR would help integrate DHS, while creating an “audit trail” that the Congress could use to assess whether the department was making progress (US House of Representatives 2005a).

Soon after Carafano’s testimony, Democratic Representative Harold Ford introduced the first bill mandating a QHSR (US House of Representatives 2005b). Although Ford did not serve on the Armed Services Committee, he had served on the DOD’s Transformation Advisory Group, which advised the secretary of defence on defence strategy. Ford said that his bill, which also called for the formation of an independent panel on QHSRs, was “based largely on the kind of review already successfully used by the Department of Defense” (Ford 2005).

The QHSR idea gained legislative momentum in 2007 when it was advanced by Lieberman, who served then as chairman of the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee. This led to the enactment of legislation mandating the QHSR that August. This legislation requires the secretary of homeland security to conduct, every four years, a comprehensive examination of homeland security strategy, programmes and policies, resulting in an unclassified report to the Congress that, among other things, articulates a homeland security strategy and describes the assumptions used in the review (US Congress 2007).

Advocating for the legislation, Lieberman said that the QHSR would advance change in the DHS and assist congressional oversight of DHS, adding that the QHSR idea “is patterned after... [the] Quadrennial Defense Review, which I believe has played an important role in helping both the DOD realign its strategies and missions, but also Congress to respond to those strategies and missions” (US Senate 2007). Other senators expressed similar views during debate on the QHSR proposal. Democratic Senator Ken Salazar, who introduced the proposal with Lieberman, said that the QDR had “helped shape Defense policy, military strategy, and resource allocation” (Congressional Record 2007).

In interviews, legislative aides elaborated on the congressional motivations in mandating the QHSR. Christian Beckner, who served as Lieberman’s principal aide on the issue, noted that Lieberman thought the legislative requirements for the QHSR would extract information from DHS that would help the Congress better understand the department’s strengths and weaknesses.⁹ Another congressional aide involved in the legislation said

⁹ Interview, 20 February 2013.

“We thought it was a good idea because we had a good deal of concern about the department’s ability to integrate its many components... The idea was that working on a long-term strategic plan akin to what DOD does would help them in their transformation”.¹⁰ A government homeland security analyst added that admiration of the DOD contributed to the congressional support for mandating the QHSR: “[Lawmakers] have wanted to imitate DOD based on an adulation of DOD. There’s an attitude of ‘They did it at DOD, so we need to do it’”.¹¹

On the other hand, most senior DHS officials were unenthusiastic about a congressionally mandated QHSR. Although some DHS officials thought a structured review could help the secretary of homeland security advance department-wide initiatives, the department leadership resisted a legislative mandate that would dictate what must be covered in a review.¹² In response to this resistance, lawmakers modified the legislation before its enactment to make some of its elements less prescriptive. For instance, Ford’s initial bill included an independent panel requirement and replicated another provision of the QDR legislation by requiring DHS to identify the budget plan needed to implement the department’s strategy at a “low-to-moderate level of risk”, but the enacted legislation did not include these requirements.

The quadrennial diplomacy and development review (QDDR)

The first congressional proposal for a quadrennial review of diplomacy or development policy surfaced in 2005 when Republican Representative Mac Thornberry – a member of the Armed Services Committee – introduced a bill that would require the secretary of state to conduct a quadrennial foreign affairs review (US House of Representatives 2005c). In an interview, Thornberry explained that he saw the proposal as a way to prod the State Department (State) to transform itself: “[State] had outdated communication systems and an outdated way of doing things. They weren’t looking at how the world was changing, where we needed a diplomatic presence and where we didn’t. As one of the instruments of national power, it seemed to me we needed to give them a kick in the pants to take a bigger look”.¹³ Thornberry’s bill required a comprehensive examination of diplomatic and foreign assistance strategy, structure, programmes and budget plans, resulting in the articulation to Congress of an unclassified foreign affairs strategy, and followed the QDR model in establishing an independent panel to assess the review.

¹⁰ Interview, February 2013.

¹¹ Interview, March 2013.

¹² Interview of Stewart Baker, former DHS Assistant Secretary for Policy, 22 May 2013; interview of former congressional homeland security aide, November 2013.

¹³ Interview, 1 August 2013.

The idea of a foreign affairs review did not gain traction, however, until the start of the Obama administration in 2009, when Secretary of State Hillary Clinton decided to launch a QDDR. Clinton established the review because she thought it would help improve the State Department's performance, give the State more clout in interagency decisionmaking and garner it more resources from the Congress. Upon launching the QDDR, Clinton said the State needed the review "to accelerate transitions from old ideas and outmoded programs", and added:

I served for six years on the Armed Services Committee in the Senate. And it became very clear to me that the QDR process... was an important tool for the Defense Department not only to 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 have 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. (US Department of State 2009b)

In interviews, State Department officials identified the same motivations, while also pointing to a goal of strengthening State's clout at the interagency level. One official said Clinton saw the QDDR as a "way to lift the State Department and USAID [the US Agency for International Development] to a better-funded leadership role in international affairs", and as a "vehicle for justifying a budget and the need to modernize".¹⁴ Another official said Clinton created the review because "she saw an imbalance between DOD and State, and saw that in order to be a more effective partner for DOD, we had to look at how we were organized".¹⁵

In addition, Clinton saw a formal review as a means to likely overcome internal resistance to organisational changes. Many officials at the US Agency for International Development (USAID) worried that Clinton sought to assert greater control over the agency, which reported to the secretary of state but possessed substantial autonomy.¹⁶ Clinton tried to mitigate that concern by making the USAID administrator a co-leader of the QDDR.

Clinton's launch of the QDDR also reflected competition with the Congress. As she was considering initiating a review, House Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman Howard Berman, a Democrat, included a provision

¹⁴ Interview, May 2013.

¹⁵ Interview, July 2013.

¹⁶ Interview of Connie Veillette, former Senate Foreign Relations Committee Senior Professional Staff Member, 24 May 2013.

mandating a quadrennial review of diplomacy and development in a bill that he introduced (US House of Representatives 2009). Like the QDR legislation and Thornberry's bill, Berman's bill set out various requirements for the review, including requirements that the resulting unclassified report to the Congress describe the review's assumptions and that an independent panel be created to assess the review.

A State Department legislative affairs official indicated to congressional aides that the department opposed Berman's quadrennial review proposal, and objected in particular to the independent panel provision.¹⁷ After Berman's bill was approved by the House of Representatives in June 2009, State Department officials moved quickly to initiate the QDDR, and thereby preempt the legislation. When the QDDR was launched in July, State Policy Planning Director Anne-Marie Slaughter, who directed the review, noted, "Part of what we wanted to do was to do [a QDDR] before we found ourselves under a mandate" (US Department of State 2009a).

In addition, competition between State Department and White House officials over control of development policy influenced the QDDR's launch. State moved quickly to begin the QDDR when it got word that the White House was planning to start a separate review of global development policy.¹⁸ The latter review concerned some senior State Department officials because Gayle Smith, the White House official responsible for development policy, favoured making USAID more independent of State. For Clinton and her advisors, launching the QDDR was in part a way to get out in front of the White House review and assert State's interagency leadership on foreign aid policymaking.¹⁹

The quadrennial energy review (QER)

Since the QDDR's establishment in 2009, the quadrennial review model has begun to spread beyond the major national security agencies, but the only other quadrennial review that has been instituted concerns a policy area – energy – that is often linked to national security.

The first public proposal for a QER was issued by a White House advisory council in 2010. The President's Council of Advisors on Science and Technology called for creating an energy review "analogous to the QDR", in order to establish a more "coordinated government-wide Federal energy policy" (President's Council of Advisors on Science and Technology 2010, v).

¹⁷ Interview of former congressional foreign policy aide, May 2013.

¹⁸ Interview of government foreign policy official, March 2013.

¹⁹ Interview of government foreign policy official, March 2013; interview of former congressional foreign policy aide, May 2013.

The following year, Democratic Senator Mark Pryor, who had served on the Armed Services Committee, introduced legislation mandating the conduct of a QER, which would include a comprehensive review of national energy policies, resulting in a report to the Congress on the government's energy policy objectives and plans (US Senate 2011b). The first two goals outlined in Pryor's legislation are to "establish integrated, Government wide national energy objectives", and to "coordinate actions across Federal agencies". A congressional aide involved in the issue noted that "A lot of federal agencies have their finger in the energy pie. A [quadrennial review] would force them to try to think collaboratively".²⁰ The aide also highlighted the review's potential oversight value: "[The] Armed Services [Committee] uses the QDR to inform congressional thinking about defense programs. The QER would serve a similar purpose for committees with jurisdiction over parts of the energy budget". In his own comments on his bill, Pryor noted that his proposal, which required the review to result in an unclassified report to Congress, was "modeled after the highly regarded Quadrennial Defense Review" (US Senate 2011a). However, Pryor's proposal conformed less closely to the QDR model than did the other legislative proposals for new quadrennial reviews, as it did not require the report to describe the review's assumptions or require the formation of an independent panel to assess the review.

Pryor's legislation has not been enacted, but in June 2013 President Obama announced that he was initiating a QER to be led by the White House's Domestic Policy Council and Office of Science and Technology Policy (Executive Office of the President 2013). Although the administration has not issued detailed public guidance for the review, an administration official said in an interview that a key goal of the review is to establish a "cross-cutting and integrated" approach to energy policy across the government.²¹ The White House may also have launched the review in part to preempt the Congress from mandating a review that would give the White House less control over it, as Pryor's legislation gives a greater role to the secretary of energy in leading the review and directs that the review cover many specific topics.

Summary of case studies

Taken together, these five case studies provide substantial support for my argument and hypotheses. Consistent with H1, I found that each of the five quadrennial reviews was established in part to promote organisational

²⁰ Interview, July 2013.

²¹ Interview, October 2013.

change in the executive branch. In addition, lawmakers saw the homeland security and energy reviews as aids to legislative oversight, whereas the secretary of state saw the diplomacy and development review as a way to boost the State Department's political support and funding. I also found that, consistent with H2, lawmakers and executive branch officials disagreed regarding the design of each of the five reviews, and that executive branch leaders launched the intelligence community and development and diplomacy reviews in part to preempt the Congress from mandating reviews with unwanted requirements. I further found that, consistent with H3, current and former members of the congressional armed services committees played a central role in the creation of each of the four reviews modelled on the QDR, and that these policymakers spread the model first to other national security agencies (the intelligence community, the DHS and State).

The story regarding H4 is more complex, as I found substantial but not uniform support for it. As I hypothesised, I found that, in each of the four cases of reviews proposed since the creation of the QDR, policymakers proposing the new review praised the QDR, referred to the QDR as the model for the review and copied key elements of the QDR's design. Regarding specific design elements, legislative proposals for each of these four reviews followed the QDR model in mandating the conduct, every four years, of a comprehensive examination of a large issue area, resulting in an unclassified report to the Congress that articulates the government's strategy in that issue area and that describes the other results of the review. Notably, these mandates appear conducive to the key problems that critics of the QDR have identified in the QDR process: the requirement for a comprehensive examination of a large issue area leads naturally to the creation of a large bureaucratic process, and the requirement for an unclassified report can make it still harder for report authors to move beyond the status quo or lowest common denominator outcomes given the incentive to try to satisfy many public audiences. Replication of these provisions, therefore, suggests that lawmakers have not tried to improve on the QDR model based on the common criticisms of that model.

In addition, legislative proposals for all of the reviews except for the energy review followed the QDR model in requiring a statement of the review's assumptions and the formation of an independent panel to assess the review. Given that the energy review proposal was the most recent of the legislative proposals, its greater deviation from the QDR model could indicate that lawmakers are growing less wedded to the specifics of the QDR model as time goes on, but it would be premature to draw a firm conclusion on that from a single case.

Executive branch policymakers, for their part, have also cited the QDR as a model for new quadrennial reviews. However, they have also sought to

maintain control of the design of reviews and have resisted the more onerous and politically risky elements of the QDR model. My expectation that policymakers would copy the QDR's design when proposing new reviews is, therefore, supported much more strongly with regard to lawmakers than with regard to executive branch officials.

Tables 1 and 2 summarise most of my key findings about the creation and design of quadrennial reviews in tabular form.

Other diffusing strategy and planning practices

While I focus on the establishment and spread of the quadrennial review model in the US government, a brief consideration of other instances where DOD or US interagency strategy or planning processes have diffused to other agencies or governments reveals some similar patterns. This suggests that my argument and findings have broader applicability and relevance. Just as the quadrennial review model has been spread within the US government by policymakers with defence backgrounds, US strategy and planning processes have diffused overseas primarily to governments that possess close security ties with the US. In addition, the drivers of diffusion appear to have commonalities across these cases, with policymakers sometimes replicating the practices of a leading agency or government to boost the integration or reputation of their own agency or government, or to strengthen external backing for that agency or government.

For instance, in 2008, the legislature of Taiwan – which has received extensive military aid from the US and seeks more of such aid – mandated the conduct of a QDR. An analysis of this QDR concluded that Taiwanese policymakers initiated it in part to bolster US support for Taiwan by demonstrating that Taiwan was committed to needed military reform (Famularo 2009). Richard Bush, a leading Taiwan expert, added in an interview, “The Taiwanese defense establishment was stovepiped. The QDR was seen as a way to create leverage for more jointness.... Taiwanese also saw this as the modern thing to do. They thought, ‘If the US is doing a QDR, it must be the standard we should aspire to’”.²²

Other DOD strategy and planning practices have also diffused to other agencies and countries. In 1961, US Secretary of Defence Robert McNamara instituted a formal planning, programming and budgeting (PPB) system at the DOD. McNamara instituted PPB, which required the systematic evaluation of options for weapons programmes, both to make the department more efficient and to reduce the military services' power

²² Interview, 2 October 2013.

Table 1. Key findings regarding the creation of US quadrennial reviews

| Review Name | Year First Proposed by Policymaker | Who Established Review? | Congressional Motivations for Proposing Review | Executive Branch Motivations for Initiating Review | Did the First Policymaker to Propose Review Have Defence Background? | Did Policymaker Cite Quadrennial Defence Review as Model? |
|--|------------------------------------|-------------------------|--|---|--|---|
| Quadrennial defence review | 1996 | Congress | Organisational change | N/A | Yes | N/A |
| Quadrennial intelligence community review | 1998 | Executive | Organisational change | Preempting legislation | Yes | Yes |
| Quadrennial homeland security review | 2005 | Congress | Organisational change, oversight | N/A | Yes | Yes |
| Quadrennial diplomacy and development review | 2005 | Executive | Organisational change | Organisational change; increasing funding and clout; preempting legislation | Yes | Yes |
| Quadrennial energy review | 2011 | Executive | Organisational change, oversight | Organisational change; preempting legislation | Yes | Yes |

Source: Author.

Table 2. Key features of legislative proposals for US quadrennial reviews

| Review Name | Core Mandate of Initial Legislative Proposal | Did Proposal Require Unclassified Report to the Congress on Review Results? | Did Proposal Require Statement of Review’s Assumptions? | Did Proposal Require Independent Panel Assessment? | Did the Congress and Executive Disagree Over Review Design? |
|--|--|---|---|--|---|
| Quadrennial defence review | Comprehensive examination of defence strategy, force structure, modernisation plans, infrastructure, and other defence programmes and policies | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Quadrennial intelligence community review | Comprehensive review of intelligence strategy, organisation, modernisation plans, infrastructure, budget plan, and other intelligence programmes and policies | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Quadrennial homeland security review | Comprehensive examination of homeland security strategy, force structure, resources, threat assessment, infrastructure, budget plan, and other homeland security programmes and policies | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Quadrennial diplomacy and development review | Comprehensive examination of diplomatic strategy and structure, foreign assistance programmes, budget plans, personnel decisions and public diplomacy plans | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Quadrennial energy review | Comprehensive review of energy programmes and technologies | Yes | No | No | Yes |

Source: Author.

(Schelling 1968). In 1965, President Lyndon Johnson ordered all other federal agencies to adopt the system; however, in 1971, President Richard Nixon terminated it outside the DOD (West 2011). In recent years, however, some US agencies – including the DHS and the Office of the Director of National Intelligence – have again sought to replicate the DOD’s PPB model. This recent diffusion of the model has been driven not only by a quest for greater efficiency but also by a desire to establish more integrated management of fragmented agencies and to build political support for those agencies (West 2011, 2, 52–73).²³

The PPB model has diffused internationally as well. Starting in the mid-1960s, many US allies and partners, including Australia, Canada, Sweden and the United Kingdom, instituted the PPB systems in their own governments – a set of decisions that a leading scholar of resource management attributed to “the demonstration and ripple effect of the United States” (Premchand 1983, 336). More recently, versions of PPB have been adopted by many Central and Eastern European governments that sought membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, and by some developing countries that possess close security ties with the US (Defense Resource Management Study Program 2010). Defence officials and experts familiar with these efforts noted that many countries seek to replicate DOD practices not only to improve how their militaries operate, but also to give domestic and foreign audiences an impression that their military is well-run.²⁴

In addition, similar patterns are evident in the international diffusion of US interagency strategy processes. For instance, many US allies now produce interagency security strategy documents akin to the US National Security Strategy (NSS) report, which has been issued by US presidents since 1987. In 2003, the European Union released its first broad security strategy, and more recently Australia, Canada, Japan, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom issued their first government-wide security strategies (European Union 2003; Government of Canada 2004; Government of the Netherlands 2007; Government of the United Kingdom 2008; Government of Australia 2013; Government of Japan 2013). In at least two of these cases, the US NSS reports appear to have directly influenced the decision to produce the strategy: a British national security official said the UK strategy document was “stimulated by the US example of national security strategy

²³ Interview of DHS official, June 2013; interview of congressional intelligence aide, July 2013.

²⁴ Interview of Kathleen Hicks, former Principal Deputy Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, 15 October 2013; interview of DOD official, June 2013; interview of defence resource management expert, August 2013.

development” and the Japanese media reported that the US NSS served as the model for the Japanese NSS (Stolberg 2012, 55; *Asahi Shimbun* 2013).

At least some of these patterns do not appear to be limited to the area of national security policymaking. In pharmaceutical regulation – another policy domain in which the US has been viewed as a global leader – other governments have modelled their regulatory agencies after the US Food and Drug Administration (Carpenter 2010). Further research is needed to chart more systematically and explain the diffusion of a range of public policy processes and organisational practices within and among governments.

Conclusion

My principal goals in this article have been to explain why US policymakers have recently established several major strategic reviews and why they have sought to replicate the DOD’s model for such reviews in other agencies. I showed that US lawmakers have created these reviews to facilitate congressional oversight and advance the integration and transformation of agencies, whereas senior executive branch officials have seen these reviews both as tools to promote organisational change and as vehicles for boosting the political standing of agencies. In addition, lawmakers and executive branch officials have often disagreed over the design of these reviews, with executive branch officials generally seeking to preserve their freedom of action and, in some cases, acting preemptively to initiate a review before lawmakers set onerous requirements for one. These findings suggest more generally that formal strategy activities are often driven more by legislative-executive and bureaucratic politics than by a desire for new strategic ideas.

I also showed that policymakers with a background in defence policy have sought to replicate the quadrennial review model outside the DOD, mainly because they thought that the replication of DOD practices would strengthen or build support for an agency that they oversee or lead. These findings extend previous scholarship on diffusion, which has focused on the spread of policies and practices among governments, by showing that the desire to imitate a leader and compete for resources can also drive diffusion across agencies within a single government. My finding that policymakers have imitated the DOD, rather than learn from the QDR, has a practical implication as well: when a policy spreads based on mimicry rather than learning, the outcome is less likely to be positive from a normative standpoint (Shipan and Volden 2012, 790–791). This suggests that the reviews that have been established based on the QDR model are not likely to be very successful in terms of improving public policymaking.

Brief consideration of the diffusion across agencies and countries of a few other strategy and planning practices, such as NSS reports and PPB systems, further revealed that the proliferation of quadrennial reviews is just one instance of a broader phenomenon. Although more research is needed to evaluate this broader pattern, it seems that, in a variety of contexts and countries, policymakers sometimes replicate the policy processes of a leading agency or government in order to influence external perceptions of their own agency or government. Given the expected political benefits of adopting the practices of highly regarded or prominent institutions, it is likely that such practices will continue to spread to agencies and governments seeking to bolster their reputations or political support – regardless of whether the practices are proven to be effective. Such continued diffusion would appear to be akin to the domestic and international diffusion over several decades of public sector pay-for-performance systems, although scholars have found that such systems usually do not work well (Ingraham 1993; Perry et al. 2009; Bowman 2010).

At the same time, scholars should not prematurely write off quadrennial reviews and other formal strategy processes as exercises that cannot have any public policy benefits. The leaders of government agencies must generally focus so heavily on navigating their agencies' external environment that they can devote little time to internal management (Wilson 1989, 32). Given this huge constraint, quadrennial reviews and other structured strategy activities at least have the potential to provide a mechanism for harried government leaders to exert some influence over their agencies' operations. Indeed, recent research indicates that, although bureaucratic inertia usually prevents quadrennial reviews from generating major changes to government strategies or operations, these reviews do often help agency leaders advance incremental policy or organisational changes, and they sometimes aid congressional oversight (Tama forthcoming). More research is needed to determine whether the reviews also have any influence on agency reputations or funding. For now, it appears that, on the whole, both the critics and advocates of quadrennial reviews are partly right: these strategy exercises are not transformational, but they can give policymakers a useful vehicle for inching massive government agencies in new directions.

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