Back in 1837, Hans Christian Anderson published a short story called the “Emperor’s New Clothes.” If there is anyone living who has not read it, two con men posing as tailors convince the emperor that their work is so superb that the fabric is only visible to those who are fit for his position, and anyone who cannot see it is clearly not suited for the throne. The emperor and his toadies are too scared to admit they can’t see the nonexistent suit, as are the emperor’s subjects—until a child too innocent to play politics cries out, “But he isn’t wearing anything at all!”

It may be a stretch to compare U.S. strategy to the “Emperor’s New Clothes.” After all, the dictionary definition of strategy is so broad that virtually any declarative sentence that expresses some form of desire qualifies as strategy. The Oxford dictionary has one definition that states a strategy is nothing more than, “A plan of action or policy designed to achieve a major or overall aim.” By that definition, the president, secretaries of defense and state, and various service chiefs are at least wearing the strategic equivalent of a G-string.

In the real world, however, a government does not create a strategy by issuing wish lists and empty lists of its desires. A real strategy has to have a tangible plan, it has to have a clear program to implement that plan, and it has to have the budget and resources to make it work. This means making difficult trade-offs and setting clear priorities. It means establishing accountability and having measures of effectiveness. It also means justifying the choices with a clear analysis of the risks and costs involved.

Unfortunately, the key public documents that are supposed to summarize U.S. strategy do nothing of the kind. The Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) issued in 2014 was a long, unfocused wish list looking so far in the future that it did little more than describe a few broad strategic goals without providing explanation or defining what they really meant.

Aside from opposing the full force cuts that would occur if the administration had to go down to the sequestration levels, and discussing some short-term personnel cuts and caps on military production, the QDR was devoid of any plans, programs, and/or budget—except for one summary section on pages 39–42 that attempted to show the size of U.S. forces in FY2019, a section that did not link any of its details to the strategic goals the QDR presented and later turned out not to have been fully coordinated with any of the military services.

The National Security Strategy that President Obama issued in February 2015 was even more vacuous. It set goal after goal, some of which bordered on the ludicrous. “Lead with purpose?” What was the president doing during his first six years of office? Handle climate change, Ebola, widespread economic slowdowns, and every other conceivable goal on the president’s agenda without ever getting down to the plan, the cost, and any other specifics? “Put our economy to work?” “Shape the global economic order?” “End extreme poverty?” “Live our values?” “Empower civil society and young leaders?” The document had hundreds of goals and good intentions but no meaningful plans, programs, or budgets.

More than that, it did not address any of the major problems in either national security or domestic programs created by the existing budget debate or the far more serious issues raised on a bipartisan basis in the Congressional Budget Office’s Long-term Budget Outlook for 2015 to 2025. The president did not address how any of the goals in the new strategy could be paid for, the critical problems raised by sharply rising entitlement costs, and the pressures to reduce defense, foreign affairs, and domestic discretionary spending. This time, the strategic G-string didn’t even have the spurious dignity of a few colorful sequins.

And then came the FY2016 budget requests. The Department of Defense talked in broad terms about a budget related to the 2014 QDR but focused almost exclusively on trying to persuade the Congress to
raise defense spending marginally above the Budget Control Act, but well below the levels the president had proposed in his FY2013 and FY2014 budgets.

The department’s budget summary presented a chart showing that its proposed program for FY2016 to FY2020 would reach the absolute minimum spending level necessary to implement the Strategic Choices and Management Review level of spending in early FY2018 without ever explaining what this meant or how the impact of the gap in spending shown in the same chart between FY2012 and FY2017 would affect the implementation of U.S. strategy. But then, the Strategic Choices and Management Review had focused on spending levels and improvements in efficiency and had never presented any clear strategy in the first place, which made the chart even more mysterious. How does one estimate the FY2016–FY2020 cost of the strategy in a document that does not have a strategy or a force plan?

The department also ignored studies by the Congressional Budget Office that showed its past costing of its actual plans had fallen so far short of the real cost that the gap was equal to the impact of the Budget Control Act—meaning it would fall far short of being able to fund its actual plan even if it got them the money it asked. The budget justification report did little better. It stated that the budget request sought to meet three grand strategic goals: (1) protect the homeland, (2) build security globally, and (3) project power and win decisively.

This was the grand strategic equivalent of saying the budget sought to do everything at once, but that the “FY 2016 funding levels will allow the military to protect and advance U.S. interests and execute the updated defense strategy—but with somewhat increased levels of risk for some missions. The Department will continue to experience gaps in training and maintenance over the near term and will have a reduced margin of error in dealing with risks of uncertainty in a dynamic and shifting security environment over the long term.” Given the lack of any meaningful specifics, the “strategic argument” was little more than a tautological statement that the department needed more money because it needed more money.

There was no clear plan, no picture of how U.S. forces would grow or shrink beyond past manpower cuts, no picture of the long-promised rebalancing to Asia—which seem to be subsumed in a vague call for a do-everything-at-once “balanced force” that would “maintain ready forces with superior capabilities to deter potential adversaries and defeat attacks across the full spectrum of conflict and address a wide range of security challenges…although at higher levels of risk for some missions, most notably if the military forces are confronted with a technologically advanced adversary or required to respond to more than one major contingency simultaneously.”

The primary focus was on one fiscal year, with no supporting force or procurement plans to provide strategic justification for the FY2017–FY2020 years of the Future Year Defense Program, and no breakout of the proposed spending in the form of a program budget. For the second time in a row, there was no plan or justification for Overseas Contingency Outlays beyond the coming fiscal year. There was no indication that the department’s efficiency and cost-saving efforts had made it possible to fund more of its strategy. In fact, the annual Government Accountability Office analysis Defense Acquisitions: Assessments of Weapons Procurement Plans showed the same problems in controlling the cost of DoD’s procurement portfolio as in the past (pp. 15, 19). In sum, the FY2016 Defense Budget request was half a strategic G-String, at best.

This did not mean the emperor had more clothes at the service or congressional levels. The Navy issued a new Maritime Strategy that did call for a few specifics: Increasing the Navy’s forward presence to 120 ships by 2020, up from about 97 ships in 2015, forward-basing four ballistic missile defense destroyers in Spain and stationing another attack submarine in Guam by the end of 2015, and increasing presence in the Middle East from 30 ships today to 40 by 2020. However, the “Force Design” section of A Cooperative Strategy for 21st Century Seapower otherwise follows the same model of “do everything through vague generalities but don’t cut our forces” as the strategies of the other services. (Although the Army may deserve a special G-string award for even appearing to have replace its failed Future Combat Systems effort with something approaching even a short-term procurement strategy.)
As for the Congress, it is nice to hear members of the Senate and House Armed Services Committee call for “strategy.” It would be a lot more convincing, however, if they mandated that the department at least explain its Future Year Defense Plan openly and explicitly by providing a tangible plan, having a clear program to implement that plan, showing it has the budget and resources to make it work, and doing so in some meaningful program budget form so expenditures could be related to given missions, combatant commands, and net assessments. Once again a real strategy means showing that you actually have made difficult trade-offs and set clear priorities. It means establishing accountability, having measures of effectiveness, and justifying choices with a clear analysis of risk and cost benefits. At present, the congressional strategic G-string does not seem to cover any more than the one worn by the executive branch.

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