

Logistics Misconstrued

By Dr. Chris Paparone

For the past few years, U.S. military doctrine developers have been busy refunctionalizing warfare—that is, reorganizing terms and concepts. One of their proclaimed joint functions is sustainment, which is subdivided into two categories: logistics and personnel services. The military definition of logistics is somehow now subordinate to the professed enveloping concept of sustainment. In my view, this change is an institutional mistake with important consequences in communicating how we act or should act in the design of our military and in the design of military interventions. My reasons include the total systems myopia and problems with the externalities and internalities of meaning associated with sustainment.

The Total Systems View

It is hard to categorize our nation's potential to wage war or project and conduct far away military interventions as sustainment. We have a historic basis to describe this as logistics in the national defense (in the tradition of Rear Admiral Henry Eccles' classic book). Logistics has national and, for that matter, international implications such as finding sources of raw materials for industrial conversion, establishing global lines of communications, creating forces, preparing forces, and so forth. Within this definitional scope, I can fathom logistics as being a justification for war. One example is Japan's 1941 decision to obtain raw materials, by force, in French Indochina in order to sustain its military operations to colonize Manchuria.

Externalities of the Meaning of Sustainment

Sustainment is a misnamed concept when it comes to global views of military designs and what we actually do. The word sustainment just does not cut it when we are referring to the conduct of humanitarian relief and support to U.S. civil authorities. In these sorts of operations, the military does not sustain (a verb) civilian populations, we provide logistics (a potential, capacity, and ability) to immediately save lives. We conduct reception, staging, and onward movement as military logistics experts not as sustainers.

Logistics typically becomes the main effort in operations under these circumstances (externalized in paragraph 3 of the unit's operation order). The internal administration of our own forces (to induce sustained operations) is critical, but is properly internalized in paragraph 4 of the plan or order. These new naming conventions may hinder efforts that would benefit from outside

research and development communities. When I go to peer-reviewed journals, for example, I can find thousands of "hits" under concepts of both logistics and administration, indicating these are broad, interdisciplinary subjects that go back hundreds of years. "Sustainment" goes largely unrecognized outside of the military community. For example, one doesn't hear "That's Sustainment" in the UPS commercial's jingle, or refer to Pennsylvania State University's "Public Sustainment" masters or doctoral degree programs.

Internalities of the Meaning of Sustainment

We seem to confuse "sustainment" with what we used to call administration. We administer to our friendly forces in their pursuit of logistics, personnel, and medical readiness—their potential to start, continue, or end operations ideally without interruption (in other words, they are sustained). In this regard, sustainment is better described as one desirable outcome of a nation's logistics capacity—not a capability in and of itself. Sustainment as a capability makes little sense to me; while sustainment as a product or condition of logistics makes more sense. For example, a man eating food (sustainment) he bought from a supermarket supply chain is now in a state of being sustained. If we are looking for a broader concept in force readiness, administration is the better descriptor of the overarching service departments' legal (Title 10, U.S. Code) requirement to train, equip, provide materiel, and so forth. We appropriately call this requirement in operational doctrine, administrative control not sustainment control.

Doctrine developers distorted the meaning when they introduced sustainment as a joint function. Indeed, in doing so we have risked losing important meanings that the concepts of logistics and administration used to bring to bear. These meanings have significant implications for the design of our military and military interventions. We should not inculcate our Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen, and Marines with the inadequacies of the meaning of sustainment.

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