



The rear gunner in a Sikorsky UH-53 helicopter watches the end of the Hairatan-Uzbekistan railroad stretch into the distance. The 47-mile line provides a valuable commercial link between Afghanistan and Uzbekistan across the Amu Darya River. (Photo by Petty Officer 1st Class Mark O'Donald)

Learning From Northern Distribution Network Operations

■ By Col. Kelly J. Lawler

The Northern Distribution Network (NDN) was developed in 2009 to deal with the pressing need to sustain the movement of equipment and supplies during Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF). Prior to the NDN's establishment, the only means of resupply to U.S. and coalition forces in Afghanistan was the Pakistan ground line of communication (PAKGLOC).

The NDN was designed to provide redundancy to the PAKGLOC and to help handle the surge of supplies associated with an increase of 21,000 U.S. troops in Afghanistan in 2009 and an additional 30,000 troops in 2010, according to Andrew C. Kuchins and Thomas M. Sanderson's January 2010 Center for Strategic and International Studies report, "The Northern Distribution Network and Afghanistan Geopo-

litical Challenges and Opportunities." The NDN has also helped to cultivate U.S. foreign policies for and strategic relationships with the Central Asian states over the past 10 years.

The opening and operation of the NDN had short-term value but also supported strategic regional and bilateral implications for the future. Three main points of discussion highlight the strategic and historical

importance of the NDN:

- How does the NDN affect Central Asian states?
- Did the NDN advance stability in the region?
- What is the possibility of a U.S. policy being formulated to build other networks that require multinational cooperation after the U.S. drawdown of OEF?

The Effect on Central Asian States

The first and most important future implication of the use and possible deactivation of the NDN is the potential effect on Central Asian states, specifically Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. These countries, once members of the former Soviet Union, can count on Russia being interested in their political decisions.

The Central Asian states, by means of the NDN, formed relationships that, in

some instances, brought closer cooperation. These relationships have the potential to change the U.S.-Eurasia strategy and overall geopolitical landscape in the region. Although each Central Asian state had its own motives for accepting the NDN, the region had to cooperate to establish and maintain the NDN.

Although the NDN is a physical transportation route, it has the potential to further influence the Central Asian states to forge alliances with their neighbors and increase stability in the region. Cooperative efforts and the Central Asian states' acceptance of replicating or maintaining alliances at the current level are what remain in question.

There are three reasons that the strategic political dimensions of the northern supply routes are important, according to Gregory Gleason's *Connections: The Quarterly Journal* article (Fall 2009), "Political Dimensions of the Northern Afghanistan Resupply Routes."

"First, cooperation involves the real-

istic, sober assessment of self-interest and common goals that are limited, voluntary, and practical. Second, commitments to cooperate can be reversed. ... Third, cooperation necessarily involves mutual understanding regarding specific, particular lines of action."

Gleason continues, "For these reasons, even when all agree that cooperation is important, and all parties are thus motivated to cooperate, it leaves questions as to whether cooperation can be durable or whether commitments will be reversed."

It may be too early to assess the full impact of NDN participation on Central Asian states. The cooperative nature by which these countries supported U.S. logistics requirements shows that they can perform when asked to with some level of cooperation.

Advancing Stability

The Central Asian states have fundamentally different ways of coping with



Steel rebar, imported through Uzbekistan, is guided into place after a crane lifts the rods out of a railroad gondola car at Rail Port 4, Niababad. After offloading the rebar from the railcar and staging on the loading dock, the rebar is then lifted onto trucks for transportation to construction sites around Afghanistan. (Photo by Sgt. 1st Class Timothy Lawn)

their proximity to Afghanistan and each other. Tajikistan maintains a largely porous border and exports some electricity to Afghanistan. By contrast, Uzbekistan has sealed off its border with Afghanistan. With the exception of granting passage along the NDN and providing electricity to Kabul and northern Afghanistan, it allows little cross-border movement of people or trade.

Currently, the Central Asian regimes do not treat their proximity to Afghanistan as a threat worthy of banding together to confront; instead, they see it as an opportunity to justify unilateral policies and reap benefits from supporting international donors who have money to spend on security and development initiatives.

“Washington’s exit strategy for Central Asia has focused lately on the so-called New Silk Road [strategy], which would aim to stabilize Afghanistan by putting it at the center of the network of trade routes between Europe and Asia,” David Trilling writes in “Northern Distribution Nightmare,” a December 2011 *Foreign Policy* article. The New Silk Road is not the physical NDN but more of an alliance of the Central Asian states to ensure trade and partnership in the region and for the future.

For example, as the United States continues to perform retrograde operations from Afghanistan, the potential for bilateral or multinational cooperation along the NDN is substantially increased. However, in order for the cooperation to exist, the United States must use the NDN more than the PAKGLOC for retrograde operations.

Future U.S. Policy

After OEF, will the United States consider adopting policies to create and maintain future distribution networks through multinational cooperation? The U.S. military endeavor to build the NDN was a massive logistics and policy undertaking. The interagency and whole-of-government approach was essential to establishing and maintaining agreements to keep the NDN open and the sustainment flowing into Afghanistan. The magnitude of the logistics improvisation required demon-

strates why distribution is so difficult in Afghanistan.

Deployment and distribution capabilities are core functions of joint logistics. These capabilities move forces and logistics support globally and on time, meeting required delivery dates and providing time-definite delivery to combatant commanders. As long as deployment and distribution remain core functions of U.S. joint doctrine, creating a complex distribution network like the NDN is very probable and should be prepared for by studying lessons learned from the NDN operation.

Recommendations

I recommend that the Department of State lead a strategic review to address the past three years of use along the NDN. Post-OEF, the NDN should be the starting point for planners and policymakers to review the New Silk Road strategy. The NDN will help maintain stability for the region if materiel evacuation is maximized along the route during retrograde operations.

Next, I recommend that the Central Asian states and all countries along the NDN come together for a holistic review of policy decisions and lessons learned. This review should include Central Asian leaders and equivalent U.S., Russian, and Chinese representatives. The review, led by the Department of Defense, would focus on the military planning and consequences of the network.

By bringing the NDN countries together in this way, the potential for alliances and cooperation could increase. Transparency and knowledge-sharing could be very powerful for future interaction with the Central Asian states. Other discussion points could include each country’s plans post-NDN, the effects of corruption along the routes, and recommendations for improving the NDN in the future.

Finally, I recommend a review, led by the Office of the Undersecretary of Defense for Policy and the Joint Staff J-4, to study decisions made surrounding the NDN. This review will define roles and responsibilities to improve communication with appropriate heads

of state and defense ministers who will assist in establishing future policy.

The review will help leaders avoid the redundant actions that occurred during the NDN’s establishment. It will also determine where the policy-making process did not fully cover the full spectrum of the logistics effort and identify the situations that made upholding the agreements with the Central Asian states difficult (and at times shut down the NDN). Having this information will help the United States to formulate strategies to mitigate similar situations in the future.

The United States must be prepared to create and maintain strategic lines of communication in order to support major operations. U.S. foreign policies and strategic relationships with the Central Asian states over the past 10 years have improved because of the NDN.

The cooperative efforts of the Central Asian states to establish and connect to the NDN are actions that should be repeatedly referred to for their lessons. This strategic success story can be the starting point to formulate further policy for Central Asian states and the United States after OEF has culminated.

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