

Moving Forward With Logistics Advising in Afghanistan

The pull logistics system that has been taught to the Afghan military may not be the best choice for the culture in Afghanistan.

■ By Capt. Ross A. Powers

Having the ability to supply and sustain an army is the difference between a professional organization and a well-organized militia.

The U.S. military operates one of the most sophisticated supply and distribution systems in the world. Soldiers can leave their bases in the United States and arrive in a foreign country ready to execute operations in less than 48 hours. As supplies arrive, the military maintains momentum to continue the push forward.

Rigorous training at the Army Logistics University tests students' ability to war-game requirements for some of the most austere conditions in the world. Complex training and the study of logistics systems ensure that officers and enlisted Soldiers are ready to respond to any situation.

The Afghan Logistics Problem

In Afghanistan, the current coalition mission is to train, advise, and assist (TAA) the Afghan military to conduct independent and enabled operations against insurgent forces. Creating a self-sustaining Afghan military would ensure national stability and allow coalition forces to redeploy confident that the Afghans can defend their country. Crucial to an independent Afghan military is its ability to operate and maintain a supply system without coalition assistance.

Even though the United States has invested billions of dollars in the Afghan military and spent years developing its logistics system, which

is now the most sophisticated in Southwest Asia, Afghanistan still heavily depends on U.S. and coalition support.

To understand why an independent Afghan logistics network has not taken root, one must first understand Western military logistics and how that model does not fit Afghanistan's military or culture.

Push and Pull Cultures

Logistics networks, at a very basic level, operate in two ways: pull and push. A push network operates from forecasted data and delivers supplies based on estimated and historic requirements. Under this logistics system, the demand for items is never truly known, only projected. The practice of holding a small number of items in reserve is common to offset possible shortages.

Pull systems rely on demand-driven data; requirements are made, and exact quantities are delivered. As a result, pull networks can be seen as more dependable. But because few items are kept in stock at forward locations, pull systems tend to be slower because of the time required to deliver supplies to the requesting customer.

Demand for combat-enabling supplies such as subsistence, fuel, ammunition, and repair parts can be difficult to forecast because of the nature and unpredictability of conflict. As a result, U.S. military logistics tends to operate a pull system. Units on the front lines do not have stockpiles of supplies and, therefore,

move quickly and take advantage of opportunities in their areas of operations.

Fewer items being stocked and transported creates a lean system that reduces wasteful shipments. A pull system is what coalition advisers are attempting to create in the Afghan military.

The adoption of the pull system has not been widely accepted by Afghan military leaders and logisticians. Receiving supplies only when required is counter to the Afghan culture. Afghans live in an environment of constant scarcity due to years of conflict and a limited economy.

The typical rural home in Afghanistan is a building and courtyard surrounded by high mudbrick walls. Known as a "qal'at" (Dari for "fortress"), this compound protects the family and everything inside. From a logistics mindset, the Afghan home can be compared to a warehouse in which supplies are held for presumed future needs. Stocking supplies is one of the key components of a push system and is a critical component of Afghan life.

The topography in Afghanistan also heavily influences the need to store supplies. Dominated by mountains in the middle of the country and along the eastern border with Pakistan, the populated valleys and flatlands are often isolated in the winter months because of snow accumulation in mountain passes.

Furthermore, for the past 30-plus years, the country has been in



Repair parts are piled up in a back room of a maintenance shop in Afghanistan's Paktia province in March 2016. When the parts arrived, workers claimed they were the wrong items but did not return them. (Photo by Capt. Ross A. Powers)

an almost constant state of conflict. Because of a limited economy and constant border crossing closures, resupplies are often limited, further enforcing the reserve-store mentality.

Operating Independently

The TAA mission has become more difficult. During the height of coalition involvement, nearly 135,000 uniformed personnel were in Afghanistan. Mentors were partnered with Afghan units at multiple levels and provided supplies, advice, and training to help the Afghans operate a Western-style logistics system.

The majority of U.S. and coalition forces left the country at the end of 2014. By 2016, just over 10,000 U.S. and coalition troops remained, and Afghans were struggling to operate the Western-style supply chain.

Persistent shortages of supplies plagued units on the front lines and limited combatant commanders' ability to conduct operations. Where had all the supplies gone, and why were military logisticians not providing assistance? A combi-

nation of mismanagement and the Afghan "store for later" mentality contributed.

Warehouses and containers around the country were overflowing with repair parts because of the Afghan cultural inclination to store supplies. Managers had no idea what was on hand because they did not know how to conduct inventories and did not want to give up their stocks.

U.S. and coalition advisers reacted by conducting key leader engagements with an emphasis on Afghan military logistics. Advisers quickly realized that there was not a lack of knowledge to operate the pull system, but rather an unwillingness.

During the height of coalition involvement in Afghanistan, there were enough advisers to essentially force a pull network to work. By teaching what was known to work in their own cultures, coalition advisers implemented a logistics network in a culture that was not ready for it.

Required Change

Changing how Afghan logisticians and leaders are advised is required for them to have a working system. The

pull mentality should be modified to fit the Afghan culture. They should be trained to use a combination of push and pull logistics.

High-demand items, such as tires and batteries, should be regularly delivered so they are kept on hand. For the combination of push and pull logistics to work, advisers must accept that there will be less accountability of supplies in the Afghan logistics system.

Modern technologies, like radio frequency identification and centralized digital distribution systems, reinforce accountability in pull-style supply chains but are extremely difficult to maintain in a country like Afghanistan because of a lack of infrastructure and technical knowledge. Using a paper-based system for reports submissions and record keeping is more in line with the infrastructure and knowledge of the individuals who will operate it.

Over the past 15 years, Afghanistan's military has moved in the direction of becoming a viable, self-sufficient force. But if coalition advisers want to continue to reduce their presence, they must reevaluate what is being taught so that the Afghans can become truly independent.

Imposing a logistics system that cannot be maintained discourages Afghan soldiers and hampers progress toward building the Afghan military. The logistics TAA mission must be changed to fit the cultural mindset of the people operating the system.

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