

A Case for “Soft Logistics”

■ By Dr. Christopher R. Paparone and George L. Topic, Jr.

The concept of “soft power,” a term coined by political scientist Joseph Nye, emphasizes the use of noncoercive means to achieve strategic ends in the realm of international relations and, by extension, national security.

Nye highlights the huge influence that the United States and Western popular culture have on other societies. The concept of soft power has matured in recent years and now a wide array of operations and activities is included under this umbrella as shaping or “Phase 0” operations.

In the future, such activities will take an even more prominent role and soft logistics activities will provide critical capabilities and support. However, we have not invested the appropriate time, effort, and resources to prepare logisticians to operate effectively in this niche; by happenstance, some logisticians learn these skills on the job. In other cases, the logistics community misses opportunities because it has not adequately developed its logisticians for this work.

Our purpose in this article is to offer our definition of soft logistics and a few ideas on how we might create specialized capacities to better prepare logisticians for this delicate craftwork.

We envision soft logistics as a strategic concept, not as part of an operational sustainment-of-forces concept, although the ultimate objective will often include enhancement of our operational capabilities. This perspective requires combatant commanders to look at soft logistics activities as part of the main efforts of a theater campaign plan.

Soft logistics could be the centerpiece of U.S. stability operations,

foreign internal defense initiatives, allied assistance, or support to insurgencies in unfriendly nations. Such initiatives may form the basis of securing strategic lines of communications permitting the United States access to markets and basing rights.

The logistics community should explore pathways to develop logisticians who specialize in this aspect of logistics operations. This may include education, training, and immersive assignments much like the Army’s Foreign Area Officer program or officer exchange programs. Logisticians can be developed to become regional experts working in various advisory roles and conducting area access analysis. One possibility is to work with the special operations community to offer logistics expertise to their developmental programs in target countries and regions.

We also should develop dedicated soft logistics capabilities, perhaps in concert with the civil affairs community and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), that support U.S. foreign policy objectives. An example would be the assignment of more Defense Department logisticians to work in USAID’s Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance.

The logistics community should design and provide support for exercises and wargames that target the development of soft logistics skills. We should work with the U.S. Northern Command to build and maintain a cadre of experts focused on defense support to civil authorities.

As we look to the future and the requirements detailed in the Capstone Concept for Joint Operations

and Joint Force 2020, we know our logisticians will be called on to develop innovative support concepts and new capabilities.

We need to use our precious developmental opportunities to prepare our future leaders for these challenges. Sometimes the smaller, softer aspects of logistics can produce the most significant effects.

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Editor’s Note: The Blind Spot is a new addition to Army Sustainment. The goal of this regular commentary is to encourage discussion on topics that the contributing authors feel may not be receiving enough attention from the logistics community at large.

The next Blind Spot will address the use of complexity science and chaos theory in the logistics enterprise.

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