

National Security and Global Logistics: Adapting to the Uncertainties of Tomorrow

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A Navy MH-60S Knighthawk helicopter picks up cargo from the fast combat support ship USNS Rainer during a replenishment at sea with the USS John C. Stennis. (Photo by PO3 Kenneth Abbate, USN)



A construction vehicle belonging to the 9th Engineer Support Battalion, 2d Marine Logistics Group (Forward), sprays down a road during an operation in Helmand Province, Afghanistan, while building a main supply route in the Shir Ghazay area. (Photo by LCpl Katherine Solano, USMC)

to a globally focused, distribution-based concept that does not rely on inventories of supplies “just in case” we need them. The kind of global dispersion described here makes supply-based support concepts unaffordable.

Complexity. The inclusion of multinational, intergovernmental, and commercial organizations at every operational echelon has added a dimension of complexity we could not have imagined just a few years ago. Couple this with the dynamic teaming and partnering that is sure to be a part of every future operation, and we can deduce that we should shift how we institutionally and individually approach the concept of command and control and the value we place on relationships. The complex security challenges of tomorrow will likely require more than solely a military response, placing critical importance on integrating with partners at every level.

Uncertainty. If our adversaries are quick learners, as recent history has demonstrated, they will rapidly adapt to everything we do. As a result, we have to be more aware of the potential operating environment and our response times to crises will have to be shorter if we are to succeed. If the future is uncertain, spending precious resources on predicting trends or depending on accurate forecasts may not make sense. We will have to place a premium on our ability to be rapidly employable and adaptively sustainable on a global scale.

These three attributes are not meant to be comprehensive, but they do offer us an opportunity to develop a strategic framework that addresses the compelling need to refocus

our logistics enterprise. To accurately determine where and how to focus our efforts, let us try first to understand the implications of the attributes listed above. What do these three attributes mean for us as a nation and for logistics as an enterprise?

A Global Framework

At the highest level, the focus of the logistics enterprise must fundamentally shift away from mass and toward responsiveness. Delivering capabilities and sustainment with speed and precision wherever our Nation requires should become our sole focus. The more rapidly and precisely our Nation responds to global threats, the more efficiently we can use our limited resources. In the future security environment we envision, one could argue that rapid and precise response should be the overarching metric of success and that we should have a constant focus on this strategic outcome.

In order to begin addressing this type of paradigm shift, it is important to focus our efforts on three critical areas: describing the capabilities that are most critical to our ability to respond globally; establishing the necessary policies, processes, and structures to ensure we are ready; and forcing a continuous assessment of the readiness of those critical enablers against what are sure to be changing requirements and resources. Establishing the right policies, processes, and structures and developing a new readiness framework still need to be done.

It is paramount that we understand and accurately describe the critical logistics outcomes that will enable

our Nation to respond with speed and precision to global threats. In determining what is most critical, we should not proceed, as we often have, with the belief that everything we have done in the past is still relevant or that all logistics capabilities are equal in importance. Neither of those views will enable the kind of paradigm shift envisioned here.

The Four Global Objectives

There are four “global objectives” critical to ensuring that we as a Nation are prepared to respond militarily to any risk to our national security: global awareness, global networks, global mobility, and global sustainability. These four objectives must become part of a response framework that will enable our ability to get to and sustain the fight—whatever, whenever, and wherever it may be. Our ability to respond with speed and precision could result in reduced force structure and may very well prove to be our best security investment over time. These objectives are not mutually exclusive; rather, they are interdependent and must be viewed as a system of systems.

Global Awareness. This objective can be described in terms of how well we are able to accurately make sense of the global environment. The need to continuously assess the environment implies a very different sensor network than most organizations have today. Future success demands that we build sensor networks from the customer back, not from the strategic level forward as we have done in the past. We will need to invest in a sensor grid that enables visibility over global requirements, resources, and processes; provides the global knowledge needed to aid in strategic decisionmaking; and facilitates response with a high degree of global understanding. It is this “global sense making” that will provide the operational elements with the level of precision that they need.

Global Networks. This objective can be described as an interconnected web of global logistics capabilities, arrangements, and relationships that serve to enable our Nation to respond effectively. A subset of this global network is the transportation infrastructure we maintain to enable the movement of our forces and sustainment. This en route infrastructure is much more than physical infrastructure; it includes our relationships with many diverse global partners that enable our access to critical nodes or ports and also includes agreements for access to capacity as might be needed for throughput and sustainment.

Global Mobility. This objective can be described in terms of the force projection capabilities and capacities to deliver the operational effects needed by the Nation. From a logistics perspective, global mobility consists of the sea and aerial ports, lines of communications, and sustainment hubs that provide the global reach, speed, and capacity to move forces to the point of need, move sustainment in support of operations, move forces to other operational areas, and return forces to their home stations upon mission completion.

Global Sustainability. This objective can best be described in the context of a global defense supply chain; a

supply chain designed in harmony with the global networks above and focused on adaptive response to ever-changing sustainment requirements. It also includes the integration of both pre-positioned capabilities and global positioning to develop more cost-effective and responsive alternatives to meet requirements. A subordinate element of global sustainability is the Comprehensive Materiel Response Plan—a critical sustainment capability intended to respond very rapidly to the most serious risks to our national security.

These objectives serve as critically important components of a new global framework that can enable an accurate and continuous assessment of our ability to execute missions in support of national security. These capabilities also serve to give our Nation the resilience to adapt as the environment changes around us. We know the future will not be exactly as we predict—usually far from it. We can also assume that it is not likely that we will have exactly what we need when we are called. Therefore, our Nation’s ability to respond globally with speed and precision is a critical imperative.

Because uncertainty is an overarching attribute of any future view, we are obligated to have our collective finger continuously on the pulse of global events in order to know whether the risks to our national security have changed. All organizations must, therefore, be compelled to continuously assess the environment in which they find themselves. The ability to effectively adapt to a changing environment will be a critical organizational attribute for every part of the national security enterprise.

In the challenging world we will face, organizations and leaders must approach each challenge as unique. That means striving to understand problems in the context in which they are presented instead of applying fixed-template “solutions” to problems or challenges we may not have seen before. In this context, fixed templates can apply to doctrine, culture, processes, or organizational structures. In an unpredictable world, adherence to tight tolerances invites failure.

How will we know if we are ready to meet the Nation’s requirements within this new framework? We know that the Cold War algorithm of two major contingency operations no longer applies, so how will we know if we will be ready tomorrow? How will we know if we have the right policies, processes, and structures in place to enable the kind of adaptive response we will need in the future? Our national security strategy requires that we be able to project and sustain military power anywhere on the globe. How will we know whether our capabilities and capacities can meet joint force requirements within an acceptable time dimension and operational framework?

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