The Fallacy of Logistics Dominance

by MAJ Travis Michelena

Military professionals often echo the importance of logistics but rarely acknowledge or practice the consequences of its loss. Imagine if three of your fuel trucks are destroyed on the way to refueling one of your combined-arms battalions (CABs). You are suddenly short by about 7,000 gallons of fuel for the current mission, and the destruction of fuel assets affects every mission in the foreseeable future. Fourteen tanks sit idle, unable to join the fight, while they wait for an emergency fuel throughput mission from the brigade-support battalion (BSB). The battle plan is derailed before it even starts.

Overconfidence in U.S. Army logistics systems and the abundant availability of supply are likely points of failure in large-scale combat operations. In an effort to mirror successful civilian logistics infrastructures, the Army currently employs a streamlined sustainment pipeline. Supply is delivered on a "just-in-time" program, with only the minimal amount of transportation assets to get it there. There is little room for flexibility within the forward-support companies (FSCs). Instead, today's Army relies on higher and adjacent units for support if their FSC assets are attritted due to maintenance, enemy action or mission overextension.

Plentiful for training

Supply stocks at both garrison and the training centers are full, close and constantly being restocked. For home-station or training-center exercises, this works with unmitigated success. There are plenty of missteps at the various echelons, but the overall system floods the combat zone with food, water, fuel and ammunition with little interruption. Large-scale war, however, is unlikely to be so generous.

The Army Service Corps produced a review[1] of logistics operations post-World War II, taking a hard look at the lessons-learned and recommendations for future conflicts: "If any indisputable logistic lesson can be drawn from World War II, it is that in any major war involving industrial powers, no nation can hereafter emerge victorious without substantial and sustained superiority over its enemy in the quality and quantity of its weapons and supporting equipment."

Do we believe our logistics systems are at a quality and quantity sufficient for large-scale combat operations? The American tradition of war is a testament to the need to conquer distance.[2] However, recent reports suggest we would struggle to meet a future global threat. The Maritime Administration is concerned with our ability to mass forces[3] with a lack of cargo ships, and it cites a gap of nearly 2,000 Merchant Marines to operate them. For reference, during World War II, Germany sank more than 2,700 ships in the Atlantic with U-boats alone.

Current capability questioned

The National Defense Strategy Commission[4] paints a grim picture of our current ability to react in multiple theaters across the world: "Because the U.S. military must project power over vast distances, strategic mobility is fundamental to the American way of war. … The Commission, however, has serious reservations about the Department of Defense's [DoD] ability to support its global operations, particularly in the event of a high-intensity contingency or multi-theater operations. Inadequate lift and tanker support, a lack of secure communications and insufficient capabilities and infrastructure are impeding strategic mobility. The investments U.S. competitors have made in overseas infrastructure – and, in some cases, their growing ability to target U.S. strategic mobility assets – worsen this trend. [DoD] must invest in a more resilient and secure logistics and transportation infrastructure, especially if it chooses to rely on [dynamic force employment]."

Figure 1. Slingload operations for logistics are conducted at a National Training Center (NTC) rotation. *(Photo by MAJ Travis Michelena)*

The Army's memories of delivering and supporting forces across several continents have faded, replaced with experiences of air supremacy, uncontested lines of access and abundant supply. Recent conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq have exacerbated this belief in our logistics dominance.

Beyond the larger strategic concerns, we often avoid learning the hard tactical lessons by negating the consequences of logistics losses. Despite enemy actions at the various combat-training centers (CTCs), supply is reconstituted and trucks are pushed through to ensure the frontline combat units have what they need to continue the training fight. However, this degradation of supply lines is a realistic scenario we should address. If logistics elements are destroyed, or even significantly delayed, it is an excellent learning opportunity for maneuver commanders to practice how to deal with a battlefield reality.

We plan and brief priority of supply but with little concern for actual implementation because we never really ***have*** limited supply. The U.S. Army is largely focused on the tank-on-tank fight and our ability to outperform, outmatch and outsupport any opponent. If the sustainment capability proves less proficient than the other legs of training and equipment, our ability to win against a peer threat threatens to collapse.

Supply lines targeted

Current U.S. and Russian doctrine specifically targets supply lines in the deep fight with special-purpose forces, artillery and air assets. The sustainment community, however, is not built to sustain many losses before becoming combat-ineffective, nor is it equipped for significant self-defense. The loss of a single fuel truck at an FSC could degrade fuel support capability for a CAB as much as 20 percent, yet this issue is rarely trained. The BSB can only backfill these losses – at the cost of its own mission – for so long before it becomes combat-ineffective.

It is reasonable for a maneuver commander to want maximum firepower at the front line rather than relegated to protecting his rear lines of support. However, given the realities of large-scale combat, commanders need to address a few critical logistics concerns to maintain tactical momentum:

- What are the risks to my lines of communication/supply, and what are the consequences?
- Considering the lack of internal logistics security, do we need to shift combat power to secure the route or provide convoy security?
- Have supply conditions changed the ability to meet the tactical or operational objectives?

Considering these questions help planners shape the operating environment to mitigate risks to tempo, ensure that commanders identify gaps and disrupt the enemy's ability to negatively affect the critical support areas.

The CTCs will need to be the agent of change, forcing acknowledgement of the oft-maligned and hand-waved "logistics problem." Support-area wargaming is often an assumed risk to ensure the combat power has a "clean"

fight. In contrast, trainers should allow, and even encourage, enemy forces to attack supply convoys and brigade-support areas (BSAs) with more than harassing fires. Opposition forces should look to exploit vulnerabilities instead of seemingly random and inconsequential mortar attacks on the BSA entry-control point and a few attacks on convoys. It is imperative for commanders to decide who goes without fuel if and when a convoy of fuel trucks is destroyed, or decide when to have Soldiers eat only two Meals-Ready-to-Eat a day when the stockpile is destroyed at the BSA. They can cause problems that are not detrimental to the overall training scenario for the maneuver units but provide enough discomfort to be a catalyst for solving problems beyond the kinetic fight.

Figure 2. A logistics-resupply point during a NTC rotation. Supply lines will be especially targeted by special-purpose forces, artillery and air assets. *(Photo by MAJ Travis Michelena)*

Negating risk

Combat commanders can help negate the risk to their supply lines with a few considerations:

- **Security platforms.** Fight to get gun-platform vehicles to the logistics elements, starting with the FSCs. Ideally this involves a larger structure change for proper vehicles and more personnel, but in the meantime can be a drive for "like items" to replace the current equipment set. Seek out M1151 armored humvees to replace soft-side models to add weapon mounts and communications platforms in tactical convoys, and press mechanics to order and install ring mounts on every compatible vehicle. Understand that manning these security vehicles will take Soldiers away from their given tasks as cooks, mechanics or truck drivers, adding more risk to the support-sustainment mission to lessen the risk to the close fight.
- **Convoy live-fires.** When faced with the "convoy security problem," maneuver commanders tend to revert to what they know: gunnery – forcing sustainment units to go through the tables as a maneuver unit would without regard for what they need to be proficient at in combat. It would be more advantageous to use convoy live-fire training rather than gunnery to train logistics-security elements. Their mission is to protect the convoy and drive on as opposed to maneuver on the enemy, and communication with the other convoy elements is a difficult task when under fire. Reacting to enemy air, artillery and ambushes are more relevant than gunnery operations. Understand that security crews are ad hoc and are likely to be broken and mixed often as they serve in their primary jobs as well. There is value in the gunnery process, but it does not fit the needs of the sustainment community for long-term success. On a larger scale, the Army will need to develop a defined gunnery manual for logistics units to better support their combat requirements.
- **Route security.** What are the threats to your lines of communication and supply? That risk must be weighed against the innate desire to push maximum firepower forward. Our training centers have conditioned commanders to leave the supply lines unprotected while they focus on the maneuver fight. However, with the acknowledgement that peer threats are specifically targeting our sustainment, we must think security of supply routes with any available assets. This may be for only a certain window,

roving patrols or securing along the route, but any deterrence of enemy action goes a long way in the survivability of vital supply lines. It is not all on the maneuver forces to mitigate risks, however. To deal with a Level 1 threat, logistics units need to improve battle drills (react to contact, air threats, etc.), internal convoy-security operations, ability to call for support (fires, air support, etc.) and vary routes and convoy times to prevent predictability.

- **Limit exposure.** The best bet for the long-term health of sustainment assets is to limit opportunities for contact with the enemy. For example, the BSA should consider a base cluster system as opposed to one large support area to present a smaller signature (and target). There is risk in creating smaller (and likely more vulnerable) formations, but that risk has to be weighed against the potential catastrophic loss from an artillery or rocket attack on the sprawling sustainment footprint. Use terrain to disperse elements in a way that values survivability over aesthetics: don't get locked into the idea that the only way to construct a support area is a big circle in a large open field. Emphasize and demand the use of camouflage and terrain to disguise your sustainment capabilities from enemy reconnaissance. Reduce convoy time as much as possible, denying "emergency resupply" fuel requests for negligible amounts and limiting hot meals to one a day. Considering the personnel strains from providing internal convoy security, the sustainment units will be operating with tight tolerances already without adding the need for more convoys. Don't unnecessarily expose limited logistics assets out of a desire for comfort over actual operational requirements.

Figure 3. A unit maintenance collection point during an NTC rotation. The BSA should consider a base cluster system rather than a large support area to present a smaller footprint and target. *(Photo by MAJ Travis Michelena)*

Maneuver commanders trust that the supply will be there as it always has been, and for good reason. Logisticians take immense pride in making the magic happen out of sight and out of mind. However, in large-scale combat operations against a peer threat, this blind trust can be faulty and dangerous. It is imperative combat commanders practice limited supply and challenged supply lines, forcing staff and units to address a deeper fight than the one they are used to. We can continue to hope that our sustainment is left untouched, but if the enemy targets supply as expected, it is vital that we prepare for the logistics fight as much as the armor one.

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Notes

[1] Director of the Service, Supply and Procurement Division War Department General Staff, ***Logistics in World War II, Final Report of the Army Service Forces***, https://history.army.mil/html/books/070/70-29/CMH_Pub_70-29.pdf.
[2] Dr. Colin S. Gray, ***Irregular Enemies and the Essence of Strategy: Can the American Way of War Adapt?***, U.S. Army War College, Strategic Studies Institute, https://ssi.armywarcollege.edu/pubs/display.cfm?pubID=650.
[3] Mark H. Buzby, administrator of the Maritime Administration, U.S. Department of Transportation, statement before Committee on Armed Forces, Subcommittee on Sea Power and Projection Forces, and Subcommittee on Readiness, U.S. House of Representatives, hearing on Mobility and Transportation Command Posture, March 8, 2018, ***Mobility and Transportation Command Posture***, https://www.transportation.gov/content/mobility-and-transportation-command-posture.
[4] ***Providing for the Common Defense***, the assessment and recommendations of the National Defense Strategy Commission, https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/2018-11/providing-for-the-common-defense.pdf.

Acronym Quick-Scan

BSA – brigade-support area
BSB – brigade-support battalion
CAB – combined-arms battalion
CTC – combat-training center
DoD – Department of Defense
FSC – forward-support company
NTC – National Training Center