R4D: Uniting the Logistics Enterprise in Afghanistan

The retrograde, reset, redeployment, redistribution, and disposal mission in Afghanistan requires the collaboration of every partner within the joint logistics enterprise.

■ By Lt. Col. Jason J. Hanifin

The U.S. military will spend the next several years focused on planning and managing the retrograde, reset, redeployment, redistribution, and disposal (R4D) of materiel in Afghanistan. This mission will be daunting, considering the scope and scale of the retrograde and the simultaneous wide-area security operations.

This logistics challenge has created an environment in which every agency in the logistics enterprise must participate in order to establish a global supply chain. The shift from Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) priorities to R4D operations has unified logisticians across the enterprise to execute this mission in a landlocked combat zone.

The level of success required can be achieved only by using a common operational picture of the combined joint operations area, which the U.S. Forces–Afghanistan (USFOR–A) J–4 fusion cell provides.

Retrograde in Afghanistan

Retrograde is defined in Joint Publication 4–09, Distribution Operations, as "the process of moving non-unit equipment and materiel from a forward location to a reset (replenishment, repair, or recapitalization) program or to another directed area of operations to replenish unit stocks, or to satisfy stock requirements."

The publication states that "retrograde materiel consists of serviceable, unserviceable, economically repairable items and weapons systems destined to a source of repair, refurbishment program, or DLA [Defense Logistics Agency] Disposition Services."

Within the R4D system in Afghanistan, retrograde materiel also includes unit and nonunit equipment, government-owned, contractor-operated equipment, and other Department of Defense materiel across the country.

The R4D system involves not only moving equipment destined for reset actions but also intratheater redistribution and redeployment of all equipment needing disposition.

As equipment in Afghanistan is identified and accounted for by service, departmental, and DLA systems of record, more than a decade's worth of materiel buildup is being accounted for.

The process requires intense management of disposition instructions and a reverse supply chain network designed to redistribute, retrograde, redeploy, and dispose of materiel.

The massive amount of materiel being processed represents all classes of supply and includes base support materiel and facilities. This volume of equipment is too much for any single-service logistics system and requires the collaboration of partners across the joint logistics enterprise (JLEnt).

The Joint Logistics Enterprise

Because the OEF drawdown is so extensive, it requires almost every logistics partner within the JLEnt to contribute expertise and business practices to build efficient and unified action.

This network, bound by a common goal, has established a multifaceted supply chain that can quickly handle a high volume of materiel flowing out of the battlefield while replenishment materiel is still effectively flowing in.

The partners bring different skill sets to the supply chain, which involves lines of communication throughout the globe.

The unified action partners include the U.S. Joint Staff J–4, service departmental logistics staff officers, the U.S. Transportation Command, the Army Materiel Command (AMC), other comparable service materiel commands, DLA, the U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) J–4, service component logistics staffs, USFOR–A, the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), NATO and coalition logisticians, the 1st Theater Sustainment Command (1st TSC), other governments (such as Kuwait), and a plethora of commercial activities.

Many of these partners are embedded with operational units throughout the combined joint operations area.

This fosters an ability to capture requirements, provide in-transit visibility, and redistribute materiel identified by the USFOR–A J–4's and other ISAF commanders' priorities while continuing to provide

effective sustainment to current and planned operations.

Each partner within the global team brings a unique specialty, pooling organizational capabilities, management control mechanisms, and contracts ranging from the U.S. industrial base to foreign partners.

The benefits of having a complex web of agencies involved in the R4D OEF operation are many. The most noteworthy are the shared financial burden, the efficiencies gained in economies of scale, the synergies attained in mutual support, and the shared expertise to manage ongoing process improvements in a difficult operational environment.

Overcoming Challenges

The challenges are not overwhelming for such an adaptive, conglomerated system held together not by command but through unified action that capitalizes on instant communications and shared understanding.

The regulated velocity (speed and direction) of materiel from which R4D is derived is from the ISAF commander's priorities and his declared end state.

The USFOR–A J–4 fusion cell links the JLEnt to NATO, which connects to a support network and establishes a total systems approach to sustainment. The materiel reduction is a massive undertaking, but the JLEnt can provide clarity through shared metrics that represent system performance.

The R4D mission being accomplished through the unified action of the JLEnt partners requires a complementary mission to provide support to more than 100,000 coalition Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen, Marines, multinational civilians, and contractors in theater.

This mission requires an intense effort to regulate multiple materiel flows and ensure that the supply chain can meet both the demands of the numerous customers on the ground and the specified time line for withdrawal of forces.

Results

The JLEnt's success over the last year was confirmed by R4D performance metrics. The JLEnt processed and established velocity for more than 12,000 pieces of rolling stock, 1,400 20-foot equivalent unit containers, and 690,000 pieces of other equipment.

It also disposed of more than 40 million pounds of materiel, reduced the number of shipping containers by more than 20,000, and reduced the number of operating bases in the combined joint operations area by more than 14. Through careful management, the effort saved more than 14 billion dollars.

This integrated network was not without flaws, and there were some missteps along the way. The R4D process was cumbersome when it came to the multiple inputs of data from various sources, which led to different operational pictures.

This, in turn, led to decisions that shifted priorities and delayed the flow of materiel until the data points were properly vetted. The J–4 fusion cell adjudicated the information and fostered the crosstalk within the JLEnt to adjust the sustainment to fit the circumstances.

The key for the JLEnt is for the network to adapt to the complexity of multiple mission sets along with the missteps and to reorient efforts to learn from them. This was properly accomplished in Afghanistan and fostered continuous improvement along with an effective supply chain.

As ISAF nears the final stages of R4D operations in Afghanistan, it is imperative that the Army document the highly successful logistics practices that were implemented as well as learn from the missteps.

In reviewing these practices and mistakes, we also need to address the issue of educating logisticians on this JLEnt model in support of future globally integrated operations described in the Capstone Concept for Joint Operations: Joint Force 2020.

Each partner within the global team brings a unique specialty, pooling organizational capabilities, management control mechanisms, and contracts ranging from the U.S. industrial base to foreign partners.

In this fiscally challenged era, the JLEnt can be synchronized and applied to home station training, training centers, and predeployment training as well as to the unpredictable future operations.

The complex and adaptive system that worked so brilliantly in Afghanistan R4D operations must become the new norm. The goal of every potential partner should be to contribute to a globally responsive logistics system.

The logistics community should work to institutionalize the JLEnt model so that our future logistics leaders can provide the freedom of action needed in operations that will require simultaneous R4D and theater sustainment missions similar to the drawdown in Afghanistan.

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