



Sgt. Roderic C. Sterling II, a member of the United Arab Emirates Detachment, 831st Transportation Battalion, unloads cargo from a commercial carrier at Al Maktoum International Airport on Apr. 22, 2017. (Photo by Sgt. Gabriel Roca)

Using Multimodal Operations to Project and Sustain the Force

■ By Lt. Col. James Peckham, Maj. Barry J. White, and Capt. Sung Min Kim

The United States has been performing large-scale combat operations in the Middle East since Operation Enduring Freedom began in 2001. As the U.S. Transportation Command's (US-TRANSCOM's) representative for Army transportation expertise, the Military Surface Deployment and Distribution Command (SDDC) is at the forefront of sustaining combat readiness in the region.

SDDC's initial efforts to set the theater centered on single port management of select seaports within the Persian Gulf. However, over the past 16 years, those efforts have expanded through diplomatic agreements with host nations and the establishment of stevedoring and related terminal services (S&RTS) contracts with local shipping companies to provide port services. The 831st Transportation Battalion,

located in Bahrain, has the ability to provide port management oversight from Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Afghanistan.

Supporting long, protracted combat operations in the Middle East poses multiple challenges because of the distance between the two ongoing operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. Nonetheless, these operations are synchronized by transportation

experts. USTRANSCOM's multimodal contracts enable SDDC to find cost-effective ways to support the warfighter through commercial air and ocean carriers. In this way, SDDC hones those battle-tested transportation networks that ultimately shape the operational environment and support combat operations.

SDDC interfaces with commercial transportation solutions that support deployment, redeployment, and sustainment requirements by contracting the shipment of military cargo on commercial U.S. flag vessels. Commercial sealift assets move 80 percent of military cargo in order to sustain an economically feasible and efficient flow of cargo that satisfies all requirements associated with two named operations in the U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) area of responsibility.

The Challenges of Afghanistan

Sustaining the operation in Afghanistan poses several logistics challenges since the country has no direct link to a viable sea line of communication. The primary modes for sustainment in the country are ground lines of communication (GLOCs) from either Europe through the Northern Distribution Network or through Pakistan.

The most viable line of communication is from the south, originating at the ports of Karachi and Qasim in Pakistan. It is known as the Pakistan GLOC (PAKGLOC). Our commercial carrier partners call both of the ports on regular basis. Unfortunately, the PAKGLOC is riddled with delays that hinder the timely delivery of cargo.

Political strife between Afghanistan and Pakistan results in border closures, and both customs officials and police consistently misunderstand border-crossing procedures on both sides of the border. All of that hinders the timely delivery of critical supplies and equipment. Every piece of cargo on both routes is closely monitored by the 831st Transportation Battalion.

The final and most reliable method of transporting cargo in and out of Afghanistan is by aircraft through USTRANSCOM's multimodal contracts.

Multimodal Transportation

Multimodal transportation is the use of both aircraft and sea vessels to transport cargo. USTRANSCOM has contracts with commercial air companies to carry cargo on "door terms," meaning the cargo is picked up at a military unit's deployed location and delivered to the units' home of record at fair market value for shipping goods globally. The first leg of the movement is by a commercial, contracted, wide body cargo aircraft.

Commercial multimodal lift was initially established in the UAE around 2010 to support Afghanistan retrograde efforts and continues to prove its effectiveness. The land-locked country is supported by cargo that arrives by sea vessel and is further moved by aircraft. The current multimodal process is a proven force multiplier that synchronizes critical sustainment, deployment, and redeployment cargo into and out of combat theaters.

UAE's primary hub for multimodal operations includes both Al Maktoum International Airport and the port of Jebel Ali. Cargo destined for Afghanistan passes through both nodes. The detachment from the 831st Transportation Battalion is SDDC's forward deployed representative in the UAE. It provides oversight for all strategic multimodal operations while assisting the warfighter with booking cargo on commercial carriers.

The UAE was designated as the ideal location for multimodal trans-shipment because of its advanced transportation infrastructure and its proximity to Afghanistan. Geographically, the UAE and Afghanistan are 1,800 kilometers apart, but they are linked by a viable air bridge.

In terms of infrastructure, the

UAE is one of the most developed countries in the Middle East. The government has heavily invested in its transportation infrastructure with state-of-the-art seaports and well-developed airports for both personnel and cargo. These advancements make the UAE conducive to large-scale sustainment operations, and commercial carriers for both sea and air have made the country the multimodal hub for the Middle East.

With 67 berths, Port Jebel Ali is the largest and busiest seaport in the Middle East. The port covers more than 134 square kilometers and has the capacity to handle more than 22 million 20-foot equivalent unit containers annually.

Al Maktoum International Airport, which opened in 2010, is located 20 kilometers southeast of Jebel Ali. The airport is the UAE's primary airport for general cargo operations and directly links to Jebel Ali through a tax exclusion zone. The UAE's Ministry of Defense (MOD) imposes restrictions on the movement of U.S. military cargo from Al Maktoum to Jebel Ali, but the restrictions are mitigated daily by the 595th Transportation Brigade's forward strategic transportation officer and the 831st Transportation Battalion's UAE Detachment.

Al Maktoum International Airport is the prime node for multimodal operations and provides a generally clear and secure route to Jebel Ali and the vital link between air and sea transportation. All door-booked retrograde cargo arrives at Al Maktoum by commercial air carrier. Upon arrival, the cargo is moved to Jebel Ali where it awaits its second leg of conveyance aboard a U.S. flag vessel to its final location.

Additionally, Al Maktoum has been used as a hub to deliver large military equipment such as mine-resistant ambush-protected vehicles and rough-terrain cargo handlers by C-17 Globemaster III aircraft. In situations where commercial aircraft cannot deliver critical combat power to and from Afghanistan because

of cargo hold restrictions, the UAE Detachment contracts necessary support through its S&RTS contract to load and unload intratheater aircraft. These missions, commonly referred to as hybrid C-17 multimodal operations, require a great deal of synchronization from start to finish but provide an additional option to move low-priority cargo when commercial means are unattainable.

The UAE does present its share of challenges. The sovereign nation limits the types of cargo that the U.S. government can process through its commercial ports. Because the UAE prohibits sensitive items, the United States cannot use the UAE as a platform to provide specialty equipment to warfighters.

The customs process is also challenging. The long lead times that the UAE MOD requires, along with the vast amount of cargo that is transhipped, continually strain the 831st Transportation Battalion's UAE Detachment, the brigade forward strategic transportation officer, and the MOD. Any delay in MOD approvals from Al Maktoum to Jebel Ali can potentially add staging or detention cost to the overall price of a move. If the cargo is not approved to move from Al Maktoum to the port of Jebel Ali, detention fees are levied against the cargo until it receives approval.

Although commercial multimodal transportation is extremely expensive, the pros of using it outweigh the cons. The Air Mobility Command coordinates strategic lift aboard C-17s for all cargo that is too sensitive to move either commercially or through the PAKGLOC. Because the number of C-17s filling lift requirements in theater is limited, commercial multimodal transportation provides the critical lift required to meet the demand for both retrograde operations and redeploying units. Unit line numbers that are not identified as priority cargo for Air Mobility Command flights are booked on commercial multimod-

al transportation after being validated by both CENTCOM and USTRANSCOM.

Improving Operations

Shifting multimodal operations from the UAE to the Sultanate of Oman could potentially minimize transportation delays. Prior to 2014, Oman was used as the multimodal

With a population almost half the size of the UAE's, Oman's roads are less congested and provide safe transport for high-priority and sensitive cargo. Oman's strategic location also provides a critical advantage: any cargo sailing to Oman from the continental United States can avoid traveling through the Strait of Hormuz, a highly contested

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hub for retrograde cargo, but a shift in U.S. policy forced a relocation of airlift and other services.

Oman has all the requirements necessary to be a primary hub for all multimodal operations, including stable airfield operations and adequate seaport facilities on its southern coasts at the Ports of Salalah and Duqm. The Port of Salalah is the largest port in Oman and has several berths that are suitable for U.S. government use. The Port of Salalah also possesses the capabilities to stage and load cargo.

The 831st Transportation Battalion has an established footprint in Salalah. Oman is considered a "warm" location, which means the battalion has the ability to deploy quickly to support cargo movement through the nation's ports as required. The battalion maintains an active S&RTS contract and office space at the port, which would make re-establishing permanent operations relatively easy.

In addition to its seaports, Oman's major airports located in Muscat, Duqm, and Salalah are served by multiple international air carriers that have the capacity to support ongoing operations.

waterway that runs between Iran to the north and Oman and the UAE to the south.

One point of concern for logistics operations in Oman is the introduction of customs fees associated with U.S. government cargo. Unlike cargo transloaded in the UAE, Oman requires a tariff for all cargo either passing through or terminating in the country. The additional fee would be included in the overall transportation cost.

The Navy, Marine Corps, and Army already conduct bilateral exercises in Oman yearly. With all of these factors taken into consideration, Oman offers many benefits for logistics operations in support of U.S. objectives.

Developing the Port of Duqm is a national priority for the Oman government. Both the Department and Defense and Department of State would have to continue discussions in order to determine long-term efficiencies. With this underdeveloped port at the doorstep of the geographic combatant command, the U.S. government has a great opportunity to stake an early claim in the development process.

Even with improvements in Oman,

the UAE remains the ideal location for the trans-shipment of cargo because of its advanced logistics infrastructure. The ports in the UAE boast state-of-the-art automated materials handling equipment. While the port infrastructure in Oman is greatly improving, it simply cannot match the speed and performance of UAE operations. Currently, both air and sea commercial carriers use Jebel Ali as a major hub in their distribution architectures. A wholesale change would take time.

Despite port limitations and the high cost, multimodal operations in the UAE provide commanders and sustainers with a critical capability to deliver equipment to the end user. This year alone, the UAE Detachment has been responsible for tracking and monitoring over 1,800 pieces of cargo.

Commercial multimodal operations through the UAE provide the primary air line of communication for Defense Transportation System cargo supporting combat operations

in CENTCOM. The 831st Transportation Battalion's detachments are SDDC's forward representatives and key components in ensuring that strategic lines of communication remain open to provide flexibility for commanders.

As operations change and priorities shift, one constant is that SDDC will always be there to set the theater and shape the operational environment through port management and cargo distribution.

Lt. Col. James Peckham is assigned to the Strategic Mobility Division of the Office of the Deputy Chief of Staff of the Army G-4. He was the commander of the 831st Transportation Battalion when he co-authored this article. He holds a bachelor's degree in environmental management from the University of Rhode Island and a master's degree in national security and strategic studies from the Naval War College. He is a graduate of the Transportation Officer Basic Course, Combined Logistics Officer Advanced

Course, and the Naval Command and Staff College.

Maj. Barry J. White is the battalion executive officer for the 831st Transportation Battalion. He holds a bachelor's degree in civil engineering from Virginia Tech and is currently pursuing a master's degree in strategic leadership from American Military University. He is a graduate of the Transportation Officer Basic Course, the Logistics Captains Career Course, and the Command and General Staff College.

Capt. Sung Min Kim is the deputy support operations officer for the 404th Army Field Support Brigade at Joint Base Lewis-McChord, Washington. He was the commander of the UAE Detachment when he co-authored this article. He holds a bachelor's degree in electrical engineering from the United States Military Academy and an MBA from Georgetown University. He is a graduate of the Ordnance Officer Basic Course, the Combined Logistics Captains Career Course, and the Joint Logistics Course.

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