

By Dr Liam Fox MP, Shadow Secretary of State for Defence
Speech to the 2008 International Defence Logistics Conference
Brussels, Belgium, 4 June 2008

The challenges we face today, in the 21st Century, have changed since the days of the bipolar world of the Cold War. Consequently, the military challenges, and the logistical support these military operations require, have changed. The situation we face in the post Cold War era has altered the world's strategic environment. We now live in a truly global economy—a world where a nation's economic and security interests are so interlinked into a larger global interdependent network that we have an unavoidable shared set of interests with a multitude of actors in all parts of the globe. We also face the unavoidable importation of strategic risk. As recent events have shown, instability in one corner of the globe will quickly affect everyone.

In the current instance, the root of the global instability is financial and lies in the American credit market, but it could just as easily lie in an energy security crisis in Japan or China, or in some, as yet, undefined problem. That interdependence has major implications for how we think about and organise our national security structures. The luxury—although that is perhaps not how we saw it then—of the bipolar world of the cold war allowed us to set a clear direction for our national security. The unpredictability that we currently face forces us simultaneously to be both reactive and proactive, and to adapt to ever changing challenges. We must frame the issue of military logistics around this new strategic environment because any armed conflict resulting from shared economic and security interest will define how we undertake any required military action. And of course, any military action will need the required logistical support.

CHALLENGES WE FACE WITH LOGISTICS

We can spend hours discussing a multitude of issues surrounding logistics in support of military operations. But little is more important than getting troops and equipment to the right place at the right time. It is in this context that today that I will focus on two aspects of military logistics: strategic and tactical airlift capability. Strategic airlift because it is important to move large numbers of troops and large amounts of equipment long distances and in a timely manner. Tactical airlift because it is important that once the troops and equipment get into theatre, they have the flexibility and mobility to move around the battle space in a way that maximises the commander's ability to fight and win on the modern day battlefield. It is relevant because the 21st Century strategic environment demands that Western militaries are able to simultaneously conduct war fighting, peacekeeping and humanitarian operations. This requires vast amounts of strategic and tactical airlift. But as we have seen from recent events, Europe is hardly equipped to meet these challenges. Getting troops and equipment to the right place at the right time has been an age old challenge to military commanders. It is also big business. Dozens of private security companies and civilian contractors have made good money doing jobs that were formally carried out by military personnel. And they have made an invaluable contribution. Today, in Iraq and Afghanistan, thousands of civilian workers are flying troops in and out of the theatre of operations, moving goods by road and air within the theatre of operations, and sometimes providing the security—actual trigger pullers—needed to sustain these operations. It is safe to say that logistics is one of the most important, albeit under appreciated, aspects of warfare. For example, the video footage of a soldier dropping the round down the mortar tube in southern Afghanistan makes for great theatrics on the evening news. However, we hear very little about how that mortar round made it to its current location or indeed how the troops, the equipment needed to support the troops, or the mortar itself gets from a British base in the United Kingdom to a remote forward

operating base in Helmand Province.

Logistics may not be glamorous for the media but it has always been the foundation on which any military campaign is waged and today is no different.

In fact, it can easily be argued that in light of recent operations in Afghanistan and Iraq military logisticians have had to rethink how business is conducted.

The traditional linear battlefield that Cold War armies on both sides trained for in the past is non-existent today.

The idea of a Forward Edge of Battle Area (FEBA)◆where troops and armour staged en masse to face an enemy◆and the Lines of Communication which support them, is simply unheard of now◆at least in the current conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Far from a linear battlefield we now find that the fight is asymmetrical◆no FEBA, no clear Lines of Communication, and no rear supply depots.

The post Cold War asymmetric battlefield offers many challenges when it comes to supplying our troops and moving them around the battle space. Afghanistan, where in many cases troops are resupplied by helicopter on a hot landing zone or by a C-130 on a dirt runway, is the perfect example of this.

In addition to the asymmetric nature of the battlefield, the fact that Afghanistan is a landlocked country presents logistic challenges by itself. Because European countries have a shortage of real strategic airlift capability, and because in many cases it is cheaper, a lot of cargo travels overland through Pakistan ◆ with some of the most lawless regions in the world.

With organised crime and the black market running rife, military supplies are easily diverted from their intended recipients. Furthermore, this method places a heavy reliance on civilian contractors. Not only are Western civilian contractors hired for this task, thousands of local and third country nationals are hired as well.

In a place like Northwest Frontier Province this can lead to bribery, corruption, or even theft. Yet, Western militaries still depend on locals to transport vital military goods like food and fuel.

In Afghanistan, some of these logistic challenges are out of our control: the dust and sand, Hindu Kush mountains, extreme weather and the remoteness of our Forward Operating Bases to name but a few.

However, other challenges are self-inflicted. Certain NATO members are not willing or unable to provide the necessary tactical airlift needed for robust counter insurgency operations.

Some NATO members have placed caveats preventing their helicopters or planes flying at night or beyond a certain distance from the main military bases. These caveats negatively impact operations.

And why is it that when European countries collectively have more than 430 tactical airlift helicopters we are struggling, within NATO, to deploy only dozens at a time?

The sums simply don't add up.

The situation is little better regarding strategic airlift. The bulk of European heavy airlift capability is in the form of C-130s and C160s which some could argue do not offer much strategic airlift capability at all.

The only European country in NATO flying C-17s is the United Kingdom◆and there we only have five compared to America's fleet of 147 C-17s and 126 C-5s.

Too many European countries, in both NATO and EU led military operations, have relied on leasing Russian and Ukrainian Antonov-124s for their heavy strategic airlift needs.

For many countries procuring it, the Airbus A400m is still years away from entering operational service. But this plane will hardly be a substitute for real strategic airlift capability.

IMPROVING EUROPE'S CAPABILITY- SPENDING

So what is the upshot of all this?

There is little doubt that in the case of airlift it is easier to identify the problem than to achieve its solution. More resources are needed but too few countries are carrying their full share of the load.

European Governments must develop the political will and make the military capability available to conduct sustained counter insurgency operations, prolonged peacekeeping

operations, and humanitarian operations. In terms of logistics, this includes providing adequate strategic and tactical airlift. This is not cheap. NATO members need to understand that membership brings implicit and explicit responsibilities to ensure that their militaries have the capability to fight on the modern-day battlefield. Fifteen NATO members spend less than the suggested 2 per cent of GDP on defence. Britain's own defence spending is only 2.3 per cent of GDP—the lowest since the 1930's. Even with the large American and Turkish contribution NATO members collectively spend only 2.1 per cent of GDP on defence. And this is compounded by an unwillingness by too many NATO members to contribute more troops and resources to southern Afghanistan. This is not the right way forward. The UK-French agreement at St Malo was designed to increase European military capabilities. Yet, since St Malo defence spending and troop numbers across Europe have actually decreased. Some argue that European countries need to pool their limited resources together through various supranational programmes within the EU, namely the European Defence Agency in order to get more bang for their buck. But this is simply fantasy. The hard truth is that the EDA attempts to hide the real problem which is that too many European countries are failing to spend what is really needed on defence. Until countries are willing to spend real money they won't have real capability. Only political will in each member states' capital will change this. But it can be done. Look to Canada to see what can be done to improve airlift capability. The Canadian Government under Stephen Harper has found a new resolve. With the lessons they learned from Afghanistan Canadian defence officials found that Canada lacked the strategic airlift to independently move troops and equipment from Canada to Afghanistan—a journey of almost 8,000 miles. What was the result? The Canadian military saw a problem and the Canadian Government provided the resources. In April, Canada completed the purchase of four new C-17 strategic lift aircraft. Prior to the C-17's arrival, Canada had to rent strategic lift capability to deploy their troops. The strategic airlift capacity the new C-17s will provide will ensure that Canadian Forces can quickly move heavy equipment, supplies or passengers over long distances, when and where needed in Canada or overseas. Additionally, Canada's acquisition will serve as a force multiplier for the NATO alliance. Conversely, European countries, whether acting through NATO or the EU, have tried solving the strategic and tactical airlift problem in other creative ways. But most of these ways are only short term solutions to a problem that is long term in nature. As I previously mentioned, the EU has contracted heavy-lift capability from the Ukraine and Russia for its operations in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and for its current mission in Chad. Should NATO or the EU really make themselves dependent on Russian military capability? NATO has recently initiated the ISAF Contracted Air Transport programme in Afghanistan to alleviate the burden on tactical airlift but even this isn't the panacea NATO is looking for. Helicopter airlift, in a country such as Afghanistan, is vital for conducting counter-insurgency operations. Under the terms of the contract, only 10,000 kg a day can be airlifted in RC South. Is this really enough to have a real impact? In addition, the terms of the contract do not allow troops to be carried in the civilian contracted aircraft. The problem is that if our troops need to be MEDEVACED or a quick reaction force needs to be sent behind enemy lines, not only are those civilian helicopters prohibited from conducting such missions, they are failing to free up enough of our own helicopters to reduce the burden effectively. More recently it was announced in the March UK-Franco Joint Summit Communiqué that a Helicopter Fund will be established to set up

training courses for crews and to upgrade aircraft for European countries that have helicopters but not ones that are equipped for frontline service in a place like Afghanistan.
This is a step in the right direction but I'm afraid that it will take a lot of money, time, and political capital to undo the years of neglect which has resulted in a rotary wing fleet across Europe that is essentially not fit for military operations.
It is too early to determine if this scheme will work. Like most EU driven defence projects it looks good on paper but often fails to work in practice.
Contracting civilian airlift or establishing a Helicopter Fund is only a short term solution to a long term problem.
Real money must be spent to achieve real capability.
To date this is not happening.
CONCLUSION

Only yesterday NATO Secretary General, Jaap de Hoop Scheffer speaking at the Security Defence Agenda, just down the road from our location, made it clear that more strategic and tactical airlift is needed.

General Dan McNeill, NATO's outgoing commander in Afghanistan recently said "This is an under-resourced war and it needs more manoeuvre units, it needs more flying machines, it needs more intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance apparatus".

If we take seriously the threat to our collective security that a failed Afghan state would produce we must act. And, if we will the ends we must will the means.

Double-hatting does not put more troops on the ground. Duplicating structures does not increase capability. Political rhetoric is cold comfort to our forces on the front line.

The biggest challenge to the logistics chain is at the beginning. We need action not words. Our Armed Forces show great courage. It is time for their political masters to do the same.

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