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GUEST ESSAY

Guest Essay to the IST

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Employing our Civilian and Military Administrative Systems as Force Multipliers to Advance Stability Operations

By Guest Contributor

As the US tries to shape its role in the world to match realities, it is more critical than ever that both civilian and military operators exploit every resource at their command, especially since it is unlikely that there will be significant new resources available to either, in the current budgetary environment. One overall approach is to define how we might use our own administrative requirements and processes to directly support our policy agenda. The idea is that we need to sync what we do to support ourselves with what we are trying to do with others.

Administrative procedures and logisticians are supposed to support the work of the operators, but as they do so, they frequently undercut policy objectives or at least miss opportunities to support them. This mismatch arises from a variety of sources, including legislative requirements, for example that a certain type or quantity of material must come from the US, to the structure of military and civilian organizations, which historically have put logistics and operations in separate stovepipes and have generally rewarded the operators, not the managers with the highest ranks and greatest prestige. If doing so was ever a good idea, it is one whose time has clearly passed.

Because of the disparity in resourcing available to US entities and their partners and counterparts in less developed countries, the way military elements or even US Embassies do business to support themselves can have tremendous effect. For example, there is strong evidence that US payments for truck transportation in Afghanistan resulted in funding the Taliban because local contractors paid protection money to them. Transportation contracts also provided considerable financial resources to the Pakistani military even when the US was dissatisfied with Pakistani cooperation in fighting terrorists, either in Pakistan or Afghanistan.

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When we are able to use creatively the resources we use to support ourselves, there can be useful positive effect, even if done on a purely ad hoc basis. In Kandahar during the fall of 2010, the team of the Regional Platform responsible for executing the civilian side of US policy in that area discovered that US military-contracted aircraft used to bring in fresh fruit and vegetables for the 30,000 troops and others living at Kandahar Airfield were returning to Dubai mostly empty. At the same time, the team saw that the prior year's efforts to improve production of pomegranate from the Arghandab river valley just north of Kandahar city had

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resulted in a bumper crop which was in jeopardy of going unsold because of bad security in Afghanistan and lack of access to foreign markets. The Kandahar Platform team saw a need (help Afghans get products to market) and a resource (empty airplanes) and spent the next several weeks putting the two together. Doing so required working through the logisticians who were responsible for the aircraft and could care less about policy as long as their troops got fed and a bunch of lawyers who wondered whether US Department of Defense assets could be used for this civilian purpose. As the team neared success, it also contacted the US Consulate General in Dubai for help in clearing Dubai customs and actually getting the fruit to the supermarkets, which the Platform had put into contact with local Afghan fruit distributors. The Consulate General came through and the fruit was delivered to great applause and considerable profit to the Afghan farmers and distributors who had been absent from one of their traditional markets in the UAE for more than a decade. This kind of success should not be so unusual nor require so much effort to achieve.

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Rather than being designed to encourage the use of our own contracting support procedures to support our policy objectives, our civilian and military systems work directly against that objective. The traditional military staff system draws very bright organizational lines between the logistics and support functions and those who execute and plan the operations of the military. Culturally, as well, the logisticians, are regarded as combat support functions and do not have the same prestige and authority as their combat arms colleagues, nor do they rise to the highest ranks in the military services. There is a saying to the effect that amateurs discuss strategy while professionals discuss logistics, but the fact is that logistics seldom gets discussed at senior levels unless something bad has happened. Success or failure for logisticians is determined entirely by whether the right amount of stuff gets to the right place at the right time – anything that works toward that goal is good, anything that does not is bad.

A first step toward using our logistics chain to support our policy would be consciousness raising for the senior leadership about the potential for using the chain in this way and then bringing in the logisticians into discussions aimed at determining how this might be done, while minimizing risk to the chain itself. In at least some situations, use of local resources, even if they had to be created first would help improve the logistic chain by shortening it while supporting policy. For example, in both Iraq and Afghanistan, huge resources were expended in bringing even the most basic supplies (bottled water, Pop Tarts) from outside the combat zones, necessitating huge truck convoys which had to be protected at great cost both from attack and from corruption. How much better would it have been for helping Iraqis and Afghans produce goods that met our requirements? Doing so would have supported our economic and political goals, enhanced our security by giving locals a real stake in our continued presence and wellbeing and minimized the opportunities of others, such as the Pakistanis from cutting off our supply lines, not by brilliant military maneuver, but just by closing their borders or enforcing a few regulations every time they were annoyed with some aspect of our policy.

On the civilian side, the amounts of money involved are slight, compared to the US military, but the demonstration effect of the US Embassy making use of local suppliers can be significant, especially if accompanied by a public information campaign designed to amplify its effects. With a commitment to purchase

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consumable items such as food or cleaning supplies, local businesses are encouraged to ensure their products meet international standards, thus improving their marketability outside the country and promoting development. Even setting up social events in cooperation with local NGO's to celebrate local art and handicrafts, again with a strong media campaign can provide funding to worthy organizations and support a broader Embassy economic and political development agenda.

Every Embassy, deploying military unit or aid mission will identify unique opportunities based on the situation in their host countries, but exploitation of such opportunities will require a real change in the logistical default setting, from a presumption that we will haul in everything we need to sustain ourselves to strong preference for local procurement and a commitment to developing that capability to supply over the longer term, if it does not already exist.

The author of this guest essay has elected to remain anonymous.

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