

**G**en. Duncan McNabb, USAF, the commander of US Transportation Command (TRANSCOM), likes to quote Alexander the Great when he talks about the effort to supply US and NATO forces in Afghanistan. His remarks usually bring nervous laughter from logisticians in the audience.

Alexander was the first combatant commander to master the supply chain. He saw logistics as inseparable from strategy, and he plotted the two in concert. As a result, his army swept from Macedonia and the eastern Mediterranean into modern day Turkey, Iraq and Iran and on through Afghanistan in four short years.

The efforts this spring by TRANSCOM and its commercial partners to build new supply lines into Afghanistan are no less impressive.

The need for new supply routes became increasingly clear last fall. Security along the two existing ground routes from Karachi, Pakistan deteriorated as militants attacked convoys, terminals and staging areas. Attacks in the Khyber Pass, the conduit for up to 75% of the non-lethal cargo for US troops, forced closure of the pass on several occasions.

*“My logisticians are a humorless lot... they know if my campaign fails, they are the first ones I will slay.”*

— Alexander the Great

President Obama’s decision to add 21,000 more US troops to the theater signaled the coming of a dramatic increase in the flow of goods to Afghanistan. Not long afterward, Taliban militants began to threaten the Pakistani heartland with attacks that forced Pakistan’s army to mount an offensive.

The urgency of the situation was driven home in February, when Gen. John Craddock, the American who is supreme allied commander of NATO, went so far as to suggest that individual NATO countries might consider bilateral talks with Tehran about trans-shipment through Iran.

The Pentagon responded by turning to commercial carriers for alternatives that would spread cargo volume and avoid potential chokepoints in Pakistan.

TRANSCOM demanded routes that would allow delivery of cargo from the continental US (CONUS) or Europe to a final destination in Afghanistan in 30 to 45 days. It required carriers to have up to six container trans-load points in Afghanistan and the capacity to move “retrograde” items back to Europe or CONUS in empty containers.

Security—from beginning to end—was another requirement, along with technology that would supply real-time in-transit visibility to ensure that cargo losses remained below 1%.

Any alternative supply lines had to be able to handle sudden surges of cargo volume to accommodate the needs of a beefed up force.

Today, TRANSCOM’s new Northern Distribution Network has two primary routes. One originates on the Black Sea in Poti, Georgia, moving through Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. The other starts on the Baltic in Riga, Latvia and moves south through Russia and into Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan.

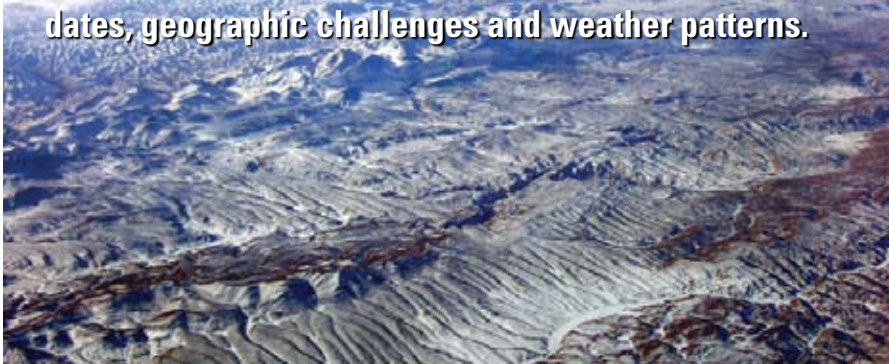
The quick stand up of the new routes would not have been possible unless TRANSCOM was willing to partner with commercial carriers. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, carriers have built networks of offices and local agents in Russia, the Caucasus region and Central Asia. We know how to clear customs, where to buy fuel, who to partner with, and what it takes to work with port and rail authorities. We’ve got relationships with government officials and assets in the form of trucks, warehouses and employees.

There are still challenges to be addressed. Major General James L. Hodge, commander of the Surface Deployment and Distribution Command, said recently that convoy entry at forward operating bases inside Afghanistan is not as smooth as it could be. He also cited the need for more rough-terrain container-handling equipment in the country.

Even so, goods have begun to flow. And despite the spread of fighting inside Pakistan, commercial logistics providers there have taken steps to protect themselves from future attacks by changing routes, hardening holding areas and adding security.

Of course, the threat to supply lines in Pakistan would not have been as great in the first place if US forces were permitted in the country to escort convoys.

**Alexander safely traversed lands where other armies fell to starvation and dehydration because he built an efficient supply chain that was meticulous in provisioning. He synchronized the movement of his forces with harvest dates, geographic challenges and weather patterns.**



But the region's historic rivalries—and friction between some countries and the United States—have presented obstacles.

Moscow indicated its willingness to allow commercial goods to transit Russia, but historic mistrust between the United States and Russia has kept the Pentagon wary and insistent on other alternatives.

Georgia's Black Sea port at Poti is a natural point of origination, but Russia and Georgia fought a brief war last year and relations between the two remain tense. Azerbaijan and Armenia are historic ene-

mies, as are Armenia and Turkey. Relations between the United States and the countries of Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan have been frosty because of US criticism over political repression and human rights.

There are non-political hurdles, as well, the most significant being infrastructure. Any sudden increase in cargo strains roads, rails, ports, customs, warehousing and other capacity in the Caucasus and Central Asian countries.

Too little volume is a problem, too. Without enough guaranteed cargo, car-

riers can't secure dedicated trains and other assets required to make timely deliveries on predictable timetables. In most countries, it takes at least 40 containers to obtain a "blocked" train and a firm schedule.

The cheaper segments of the journey aren't without their own hassles. Moving containers from the Black Sea to the Caspian Sea by ferry up the River Don is faster and less expensive than transferring them to trucks or trains in Azerbaijan. The realities of the Russian winter, however, mean that the Don is navigable only part of the year.

The search for new paths into Afghanistan has included exploration of eastern routes originating in China or traversing Siberia from the Russian Far East. Those lanes also present problems.

The genius of Alexander the Great in 330 BC was to rely on a combination of local resources and supplies brought to him by his fleet. He knew that he could not move his army on local resources alone, just as he knew that supply convoys coming overland from the rear could not survive without consuming all that they intended to carry to him.

Alexander safely traversed lands where other armies fell to starvation and dehydration because he built an efficient supply chain that was meticulous in provisioning. He synchronized the movement of his forces with harvest dates, geographic challenges and weather patterns. He sent forward observers to map roads and moved troops in parallel with major rivers. His forces advanced in stages, often after forming alliances with locals and using them to build garrisons. He ordered double-time marches to conserve provisions.

Using some of those same lessons, TRANSCOM leveraged local sourcing, regional understanding and commercial know-how to build multiple lanes into Afghanistan as violence in Pakistan began to disrupt movement of supplies. **DTJ**

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