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INTEGRATING LOGISTICS AND ENGINEERING INTO MIDDLE EAST DETERRENCE

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“Throughout American history, deterrence has meant fixing a basic truth within the minds of our potential foes: And that truth is that the costs and risks of aggression are out of line with any conceivable benefit.”

– [Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III](#)

In 2021, 20 years after 9/11, the Middle East witnessed several events that reversed decades of U.S. buildup and constant troop presence, negating tremendous American investment in the region. The war in Afghanistan ended and the U.S. withdrew its integrated missile defense shield by [redeploying](#) its Terminal High Altitude Air Defense (THAAD) system and eight Patriot air defense systems from the Arabian Peninsula. The U.S. closed bases, relocated aircraft, redeployed troops, and reduced its overall military footprint in the region. During this period of force reductions, negotiators in Vienna were unable to agree on a return to 2015 Iran nuclear deal, known as the [Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action](#). At the same time, Iran continued to strengthen both its nuclear and ballistic missile programs and work through proxies to [attack U.S. partners](#) and American interests in the Middle East.

As the Pentagon funnels more military assets and capabilities into the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command (USINDOPACOM) theater, U.S. commanders in the Middle East must now adjust their strategy using an economy of force approach. They need to achieve security and deterrence outcomes by proverbially “doing more with less.” Without the same robust funding,

large troop presence and expansive posture, the U.S. Central Command (USCENTCOM) will have to consider new and creative approaches to achieving results for regional deterrence, while also strategically competing with China and Russia.

The concept of integrated deterrence is the cornerstone of the [forthcoming 2022 National Defense Strategy](#) (NDS). And while the NDS uses China as its pacing threat, integrated deterrence in the USCENTCOM Area of Responsibility (AOR) is necessary to deter Iran, assure America’s partners, ensure that other near-peer competitors don’t encroach, and compensate for the lack of fires and maneuver capabilities. This strategy would be made most effective by integrating theater logistics and engineering capabilities more prominently into the deterrence campaign.

Reorganizing logistics and engineering to bolster integrated deterrence

The idea of integrated deterrence depends on a network of military and civilian capabilities across domains, working in concert with allied and partner capabilities. In doing so, USCENTCOM should use logistics capabilities to employ a shaping campaign within its integrated defense strategy. That campaign should focus on developing and organizing military, civilian, and partner logistics and engineering along four lines:

1. Restructure contingency basing and military construction processes.

As operational commitments dwindled in the Middle East and the Department of Defense (DoD) commensurately reduced resources, strategists at USCENTCOM began to relook at posture, particularly [contingency basing](#). The array, size, number, and capabilities of theater bases must support deterrence while reducing exposure to vulnerabilities, but changing existing basing is a challenging process. Current USCENTCOM basing evolved over decades as a legacy carryover from Operation Desert Shield and Operation Desert Storm; it remained to support Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom in more recent years. Today, those same bases are malpositioned for an effective integrated deterrence against Iran, and create gaps that near-peer adversaries will use to compete and exploit to gain advantage.

The [2018 NDS](#) promulgated the concept of moving forces out of mega-bases to smaller, more resilient, and evenly distributed operating locations, saying that, “Transitioning from large, centralized, unhardened infrastructure to smaller, dispersed, resilient, adaptive basing that include active and passive defenses will also be prioritized.” The greatest challenge for the DoD in realizing this concept is the prolonged bureaucratic process involved in closing enduring locations and nominating new bases as either enduring or contingency locations. Adding a new enduring location is a lengthy process via the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD) and is a zero-sum game — to open bases in priority AORs, such as USINDOPACOM, enduring locations in USCENTCOM must close. In the case of establishing less-permanent contingency locations, the process requires that the location support a named contingency operation. Additionally, Military Construction (MILCON) funding authorities restrict construction projects to enduring locations only, further complicating an already difficult basing process. The resulting sluggish rate of progress leads to stagnant, vulnerable, and ineffective basing.

This antiquated model also led to paralysis in addressing regional deterrence requirements. Many legacy bases grew into mega-cities whose mission became diluted with other requirements. Current locations exist in large clusters along the eastern edge of the Arabian Peninsula and are not well-distributed across the region. Because they were not susceptible to major threats from Afghanistan or Iraq, U.S.

commanders did not sufficiently harden these locations, exposing them to Iran’s growing ballistic missile threat.

To address this threat, USCENTCOM began to implement a strategy to exercise [use of smaller, dispersed, resilient locations](#) in western Saudi Arabia known as the Western Sustainment Network. This concept relied on partner nation (PN) infrastructure and the ability to rapidly deploy, close, and support forces. The key to making this new basing strategy functional is a resilient logistics and distribution network that connects and sustains the expeditionary locations. More importantly, these basing locations must be adaptable and flexible and have the capacity to quickly activate when the commander needs to support a contingency or provide a strategic message to an adversary.

2. Redesign lines of communication (LOCs) and distribution routes.

Routine distribution routes in the USCENTCOM AOR have not changed in decades. Sustainment cargo must transit via sea routes that pass through three critical — yet vulnerable — chokepoints to reach the large bases along the eastern Arabian Peninsula: the Suez Canal, Bab el-Mandeb, and the Strait of Hormuz. Air routes rely on large, fixed airfields that are vulnerable to enemy ballistic missile threats and, as demonstrated recently, to proxy force attacks. For many years, the overlying and often unchallenged assumption by many planners was that the U.S. will maintain domain supremacy to move forces and supplies into the theater uncontested.

As threats evolved, USCENTCOM established the [Trans-Arabian Network](#) (TAN), which is a collection of nodes, modes, and routes connecting Sea Ports of Debarkation (SPODs) and Aerial Ports of Debarkations (APODs) in over 10 countries. The TAN is meant to ensure freedom of movement and support a distributed network of bases. Last year, the 21st Theater Sustainment Command exercised the TAN as part of Logistics Exercise 21 ([LOGEX 21](#)), deliberately programing cargo through the port of Yanbu, Saudi Arabia in the Red Sea, eliminating two of the three major chokepoints. However, to be effective and nimble, sustainment forces need to exercise the TAN more often and transportation planners should routinely shift cargo between different ports, routes, and modes. This approach would involve shifting commercial carriers to conduct on/offloading at new locations, and exercising the industrial base



Photo above: Military vehicles are stationed in a row after offload from the Liberty Peace cargo vessel at the industrial port of Yanbu, Saudi Arabia on April 20, 2021. They will be transported back to Kuwait as part of logistics Exercise, LOGEX21. U.S. Army photo by Capt. Elizabeth Rogers.

by contracting for overland movement along non-standard routes. As a result, United States Transportation Command (USTRANSCOM) could validate new ports while also providing the USCENTCOM commander operational flexibility. Additionally, this operationally-driven logistics approach would become a part of a communications strategy designed to not just deter our adversaries, but also cause them to strategically recalculate and confuse them about our presence and capability in the AOR.

3. Increase logistics-focused dynamic force employment (DFE) events.

The 2018 NDS also introduced the concept of employing forces during the shaping phase of a campaign in a way that is more agile and unpredictable. The traditional schedule of rotational deployments and U.S. force movements in and out of theater is what former [Secretary of Defense James Mattis described](#) as “ill suited to a world bristling with great power challenges. It telegraphs American punches.” The 2018 NDS aimed to maneuver U.S. forces so as to be “strategically predictable” to

our allies and “operationally unpredictable” to our adversaries. The U.S. has conducted DFE events with measured success over the years using combat capability, but has rarely integrated the use of logistics capabilities or logistics forces to message the same unpredictability to adversaries. USCENTCOM’s joint biennial [Exercise Native Fury](#) comes close, with its joint logistics over the shore (JLOTS) component, but is both predictable and often held in the same location, reducing its effectiveness.

With the DoD shifting forces to USINDOPACOM, USCENTCOM will face significant challenges creating strategic messages that will give adversaries pause. The command should recalibrate how to leverage its current logistics capabilities to maximize effects across the AOR. Types of logistics-focused DFE events that could provide this strategic result include:

- Deploying logistics personnel and equipment into a new basing location for a short time to exercise base opening/closing and test PN military and civilian logistics capabilities at that location, including contracting, life support, fuel, storage, transportation, and sustainment.



Photo above: Capt. Shayna Taylor ground guides the driver of an M2/A2 Bradley Fighting Vehicle to the proper staging area as part of the logistics exercise, LOGEX 21, at the industrial port at Yanbu, Saudi Arabia on April 20, 2021. [U.S. Army photo by Capt. Elizabeth Rogers.](#)

- Setting up a logistics hub in an expeditionary location away from established bases.
- Deploying naval logistics ships to diverse commercial ports to conduct supply replenishments.
- Executing a full offload of a Maritime Sealift Command ship with prepositioning equipment and supplies, then backloading it at a different port location.
- Deploying strategic airlift and refueling aircraft into a commercial air terminal and establishing a military refueling and staging area to support other rotational forces into and out of the AOR.

These types of logistics force employments demonstrate the DoD's ability to strategically maneuver forces and equipment at the time and place of our choosing, sustain them, and redeploy to other locations when needed. They also convey a strategic message to our adversaries that the U.S. remains capable, yet unpredictable.

4. Continue logistics security cooperation with regional partners.

PNs likely won't deploy out of the region during a conflict and do not require U.S.-sized logistics capabilities or capacity. However, they do rely heavily on U.S.-provided systems — such as air defense, fighter aircraft, and munitions — for deterrence and must sustain those systems over time. To be most effective, they not only need to be able to support their own systems but should also use existing security cooperation programs to improve interoperability with the U.S. and each other. In doing so, they can increase their capacity to support integrated deterrence in the shaping phase of a campaign.

Iran's ballistic missile capability crosses over several countries' air domains and poses a regional threat to multiple Middle Eastern nations. To deter and defend against it, regional partners, with the support of the U.S., should develop a network of integrated defenses. To support this concept, PNs should work toward interoperability and equipment

modernization. This would reduce the logistics burden associated with dissimilar, obsolete, or foreign-made systems that are both difficult to sustain and often impossible to integrate into an effective deterrence.

While many partners in the region are proficient at operating their major weapons systems, they often struggle to sustain them over time. They lack the institutional logistics capability to plan lifecycle sustainment, execute major equipment overhauls, track consumption, and manage spare parts and munitions inventories. PNs must also ensure they have the right supplies and stockpiles to defend and fight in the case of a contingency. Continued engagement through foreign military sales (FMS) programs, [logistics institutional capacity building](#) (ICB) activities, multinational exercises, international military education and training (IMET), and military-to-military (M2M) events will help improve PNs' logistic capabilities and capacity. The U.S. must ensure that, when these programs provide major weapons systems, they include an integrated logistics approach to sustaining them over time — either organically or through contractor logistics support. Additionally, the U.S. must continue to work with partners to ensure they professionalize their national institutional-level logistics systems to support a ready, integrated, and modernized force.

Conclusion

For centuries, commanders have acknowledged the importance of logistics in fighting major wars, yet they can be equally as valuable in deterring and preventing conflict; logistics can signal that the U.S., working with our allies and partners, can rapidly deploy and sustain forces anywhere in the world. Preventing future conflict in the Middle East remains a strategic imperative, even as the DoD continues to reduce its military presence in the region to focus on other theaters.

Gen. Frank McKenzie, USCENTCOM commander, reinforced the need to “work with like-minded allies and partners to advance our shared interests to address the four global challenges that manifest across the USCENTCOM AOR: China, Russia, Iran, and Violent Extremist Organizations (VEOs)” in his last [posture statement before the Senate Armed Services Committee](#). To do so, USCENTCOM, supported by the DoD, can improve theater deterrence by incorporating more logistics and engineering capabilities into its Middle East theater campaign. These activities should center on improving the contingency basing

and MILCON processes to realign current posture; redesigning and exercising alternate logistics networks; employing more logistics forces as part of the DFE concept; and improving partners' logistics capabilities, capacity, and interoperability as part of a truly integrated deterrence approach. Such an approach would clearly broadcast the secretary of defense's message to our adversaries that the cost of aggression is not worth any perceived benefit.

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