



Risky Business

Commercial Support for Large-Scale Ground Combat Operations

Maj. Gen. Rodney D. Fogg, U.S. Army

Lt. Col. William C. Latham Jr., U.S. Army, Retired



Commanders never have enough resources. Successful commanders deploy their limited resources with care, accepting and managing risks where appropriate. While acknowledging the inherent risk of military operations, Army doctrine urges commanders to “assess and mitigate risk continuously.”¹

The U.S. Army’s continuing reliance on commercial support poses one such risk. While the Army has always employed contracted capabilities in support of military operations, the scope of that support has increased dramatically in the past twenty-five years. As an example, contractors now outnumber American military personnel operating in the United States Central Command area of operations.²

In part, this reliance on commercial support reflects geopolitical considerations such as legislative force caps and host-nation limitations on American military personnel operating within their borders. In

addition, commanders frequently rely on commercial support because acquiring services and commodities in theater costs far less than transporting that capability from the continental United States.³

The Army’s force structure also fosters dependence on commercial support. Not surprisingly, the expanding role of contract support parallels corresponding reductions in the Army’s organic sustainment capabilities and the transfer of many sustainment units to the reserve component.⁴ These transfers reflect

Afghan security forces inspect the site of a suicide car bomb 19 November 2014 at the gate of Green Village compound, a large fortified complex where many international contractors live and work in Kabul, Afghanistan. This was one of many explosions to rock the Afghan capital around that time. (Photo by Shah Marai, Agence France-Presse)

a series of decisions by senior leaders to accept risk within the sustainment mission set, partly because commercial support can and has mitigated that risk during recent operations.⁵

Preparing for the Next War

The next twenty years, however, present different and far more dangerous challenges. The Army has spent much of the past two decades fighting insurgents in places like Fallujah, Iraq, and Helmand Province, Afghanistan. Meanwhile, our international competitors—and potential adversaries—have invested heavily in emerging technologies that are reducing our technological advantages, expanding the modern battlefield, and changing the nature of conflict.⁶

Emerging military concepts argue that America faces “an ever more lethal and disruptive battlefield, combined across domains, and conducted at increasing speed and reach—from close combat, throughout overseas theaters, and reaching to our homeland.”⁷ The Army’s chief of staff has compared this type of conflict to battles fought during World War II, including the deadly beaches of Iwo Jima, while doctrinal publications have invoked the bloody fighting at Kasserine Pass in Africa and the Huertgen Forest in Northern Europe.⁸

Similar to those seen during World War II, large-scale ground combat operations (LSGCO) will feature more casualties, a higher operational tempo, and greater demand for supplies and equipment. To meet these challenges, the Army is rebalancing its force structure and updating its capstone sustainment doctrine, Field Manual (FM) 4-0, *Sustainment Operations*, to improve the velocity, precision, and survivability of future sustainment operations.⁹

Maj. Gen. Rodney D. Fogg, U.S. Army, commands the U.S. Army Combined Arms Support Command at Fort Lee, Virginia. He holds a BA from King College and Master’s degrees from the Florida Institute of Technology and the U.S. Army War College.

Lt. Col. William C. Latham Jr., U.S. Army, retired, directs the United States Training and Doctrine Command Capability Manager’s Office for Operational Contract Support at Fort Lee, Virginia. He holds a BA from Georgetown University and an MA from the University of Alaska, Fairbanks.

Contractors Are Not Going Away

These improvements will provide commanders with more organic sustainment capability, especially in the forward area. However, they will not eliminate the need for commercial support. Existing gaps in the Army’s fuel distribution, unit mobility, and maintenance capabilities will require several years to reduce, and the recalibration of capabilities between active and reserve components will take even longer to address. In the meantime, the Army will continue to rely on commercial support to fill these logistical support gaps.

Unfortunately, most Army exercises and professional military education courses pay little attention to these challenges. As a result, deploying units rarely learn about operational contract support (OCS) until their arrival in theater.¹⁰

Contractors will play an especially critical role in shaping operations, when Army service component commands depend heavily on the Logistics Civil Augmentation Program (LOGCAP) and other external support contracts to open ports, establish intermediate staging bases, and execute the reception, staging, and onward movement of arriving units. As operations develop, most uniformed sustainment capabilities will deploy forward to support the corps headquarters, divisions, and brigades engaged in direct combat, leaving an enormous joint security area dependent on contractors to operate the theater distribution network and provide communications, security, and base life support.¹¹

The importance and complexity of commercial support requires careful planning and integration ahead of time, and effective oversight during execution. As part of the planning process, commanders should anticipate the probability of contractor casualties, especially forward of the corps rear boundary. Within the joint security area (JSA), contractors will face threats from enemy long-range fires, weapons of mass destruction, sabotage, and attacks by special operations units, paramilitary groups, and criminal networks. Moreover, enemy activity in other domains, such as cyberattacks, may limit the availability, feasibility, or effectiveness of commercial support at a critical point. Commanders need to understand these risks, properly integrate considerations for contractor support into planning, and take appropriate steps to manage them.¹²

Field service representatives (FSRs) operating forward of the corps rear boundary will face the greatest



risk during LSGCO, and commanders must ensure these contractors are trained and equipped to survive within close proximity to the enemy. At the same time, senior Army leaders and policy makers should reexamine both the financial cost and the operational risk associated with our current reliance on contracted logistical support (CLS). The threats to contractors in the JSA will be less intense but no less lethal, as enemy forces seek to disrupt logistical facilities, communications networks, and critical infrastructure.¹³

Risk 1: Contractor Availability

American military forces currently have access to commercial support on a global scale. For a variety of reasons, however, that support may not be available during early phases of a LSGCO. A host-nation decision to nationalize its industries, for example, could deprive U.S. forces of commercial support in the midst of a deployment. Additionally, adversaries may use both lethal and nonlethal means to undermine commercial support, such as an attack on port facilities, that could damage critical infrastructure while discouraging host-nation support for U.S. military operations.

Sgt. 1st Class Rodney Lissade, the Defense Logistics Agency (DLA) representative for the 3rd Infantry Division Resolute Support Sustainment Brigade (RSSB), and Mark Davis, a transportation security technician with Fluor (a subcontractor of DLA), discuss plans to move fuel trucks 22 November 2017 at the National Afghan Trucking yard, Bagram Airfield (BAF), Afghanistan. Through the combined efforts of RSSB soldiers, civilian contractors, and security personnel, fuel is brought onto BAF to be used by the post or distributed throughout the Combined Joint Operations Area–Afghanistan. (Photo by Spc. Elizabeth White, U.S. Army)

Separately, a potential enemy could arrange contracts with key vendors within a specific region, thus denying a needed capability to U.S. forces.¹⁴

These scenarios are not without precedents. During World War II, for example, Australian stevedores went on strike during the height of the Pacific campaign, forcing American commanders to employ their own personnel to load and unload ships at Australian ports. More recently, Kellogg Brown and Root (KBR) suspended convoy operations in Iraq in April 2004 due to Shiite militia attacks along the main supply route between Kuwait and Baghdad.¹⁵



Risk 2: Long-Range Fires

During LSGCO, enemy long-range fires pose the most significant threat to contractors in the JSA. According to FM 3-0, *Operations*, many of our adversaries now have the ability to employ precision fires from long-range rocket launchers, cruise and ballistic missiles, and weapons of mass destruction. These weapons will target not only maneuver forces but also sustainment activities and mission command networks that depend on contracted support personnel and equipment.¹⁶

Consequently, though the joint force commander will prioritize the destruction of enemy long-range fires capabilities, U.S. and Allied forces, and the contractors supporting them, must conduct survivability operations in the JSA to mitigate enemy threats.¹⁷ These steps include the construction and hardening of protective positions, dispersion of assets, and employment of camouflage and concealment. In addition, these elements will employ operational security measures to minimize thermal and electronic signatures.

Nevertheless, such efforts may reduce, but cannot eliminate, the threat from enemy fires. The increased risk will add significantly to the cost of providing commercial

Wounded contractors from the United States and other countries, injured during a 2 December 2011 suicide attack on a military installation in Logar Province, are assisted by soldiers of the 125th Brigade Support Battalion medical company surgical team of Task Force Mustang in Forward Operating Base Shank in eastern Afghanistan. (Photo by Umit Bektas, Reuters)

support while placing an additional burden on commanders to provide security and oversight of contractors operating within the JSA. Because every Army warfighting function relies directly or indirectly on commercial support, the second- and third-order impacts of enemy attacks on contractors will significantly degrade operations.¹⁸

Risk 3: Field Service Representatives in Harm's Way

In LSGCO, most American casualties would occur in forward areas, where enemy direct and indirect fires will produce devastating effects. The Army's multi-domain operations concept predicts the "weight of fire produced by standard multiple rocket launchers and cannon artillery employed in mass present the greatest danger

to friendly ground forces, which can be destroyed before closing with enemy maneuver forces.”¹⁹

To survive, fight, and win on this chaotic battlefield, the Army relies heavily on CLS to maintain the readiness of its many technically advanced systems. In accordance with their contracts, FSRs routinely deploy with Army combat forces to repair and maintain critical equipment such as mission command and theater air defense systems. Their presence within these formations creates a double-edged sword, allowing contractors the protection afforded by the units’ own security measures while exposing them to the significantly increased risks associated with proximity to the enemy.²⁰

Owing to the increased sophistication and lethality of the next war, FSRs face a much greater risk than other contractors and thus demand more resources and attention from the commanders obliged to protect them. Given current Army force structure and the requirement for CLS, eliminating reliance on FSRs does not provide a feasible solution. At best, Army leaders may restrict FSRs to the division or corps rear area while incorporating force protection for contractors as a training objective at combat training centers. Meanwhile, we should reduce operational risk by continuing efforts to reduce CLS requirements for new and updated systems.

Risk 4: Outsourcing Operations to Consolidate Gains

By definition, Army formations conduct operations to consolidate gains in those areas where large-scale ground combat operations have ceased. The transition to consolidation of gains, however, reflects a change in the scale of combat operations, not necessarily a change in their lethality.²¹

Operations to consolidate gains combine security and stability tasks in a manner sufficiently decisive to achieve national strategic aims. Their execution, however, depends on the unit’s ability to establish and sustain security. Furthermore, planning for these operations should assume enemy forces will use every available means to protract conflict. In short, consolidation of gains requires carefully planned combined arms operations employing maneuver forces to locate and destroy both conventional and unconventional forces within a designated area.²²

Contract support for these operations will depend entirely on the level of security within the area of

operations. As U.S. forces and their coalition partners improve security and begin transitioning toward stability tasks, commanders may accept additional risk by introducing contracted capabilities to support U.S. military requirements and to perform designated stability and reconstruction tasks. Nevertheless, as noted above, contractors are exceptionally vulnerable to enemy attack. Depending on theater guidance, commanders may need to implement additional force protection measures to ensure the safety and continuity of contracted support.

Risk 5: Who’s in Charge?

To fight LSGCO, the Army will depend heavily on its own commercial support as well as the contracted capabilities of coalition partners, other governmental agencies, and Department of Defense enablers such as the U.S. Transportation Command and the Defense Logistics Agency. Current policy and doctrine oblige the combatant commander to plan, integrate, and synchronize that contracted support while incorporating contractors within the theater security plans.²³

In turn, the combatant commander may delegate portions of that responsibility, including coordination of contracting support, to the Army service component command (ASCC), which has doctrinal responsibility for setting the theater. A theater sustainment command will support this mission by coordinating sustainment functions, including those provided by contractors, across the area of responsibility. Subordinate units, such as contracting support brigades and Army field support brigades, provide additional support in terms of managing contractors, monitoring performance, and enforcing policies within theater.²⁴

As the senior Army headquarters, the ASCC must synchronize the many functions necessary to integrate contracted support within the operational concept. Partly due to Department of Defense-mandated limitations on the size of headquarters, current ASCC tables of organization and equipment fail to provide a dedicated OCS planning capability, causing some ASCC headquarters to rely heavily on the OCS branch within the theater sustainment command to perform those functions.²⁵

This approach fails to address the many OCS issues outside the sustainment realm, such as vendor vetting, policies for arming contractors, and construction

requirements. In addition, the ASCC staff may not fully integrate OCS planning considerations across staff functions if a subordinate headquarters performs the majority of OCS planning activities. During combat, the delegation of OCS planning responsibility limits the senior mission commander's situational awareness of emerging threats, a contributing factor during the previously mentioned attacks on KBR convoys in April 2004.²⁶

Separately, the contracting support brigade and the Army field support brigade perform critical roles but have limited capacity to monitor contractor activities, restricting their ability to ensure senior commanders have the information necessary to make informed decisions regarding the risk to contractors in a LSGCO environment. Ultimately, the commander directly responsible for contractors operating in his or her sector requires timely and accurate information to make an informed risk assessment.²⁷

Conclusion

We cannot wish away the considerable risk posed by our dependence on OCS. The Army has reshaped its force structure several times in the past two decades, but each reorganization relied on contracted capabilities to fill critical gaps. The current structure continues to accept risk by assuming that commercial support will provide timely and responsive support for future military operations.²⁸

The emerging capabilities of our near-peer competitors increase the danger of that assumption. To help future commanders mitigate risk, we should re-balance capabilities between active and reserve forces, reduce our reliance on FSRs, expand OCS content within professional military education and collective training, and provide operational headquarters with the capability to plan, integrate, and manage operational contract support for LSGCO. ■

Notes

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