

[Back](#) **Af-Pak strategy: Logistic nightmare**

The 'surge' in US-Nato strength in Afghanistan raises questions of how the troops will be sustained, given the continuing attacks on supply convoys through Pakistan. The surge will call for a massive logistical effort with far greater costs than anticipated, says BHASKAR BALAKRISHNAN

The Obama administration is in the process of finalising its new Af-Pak strategy to defeat Al-Qaeda and its allies in this volatile region. A key component of this strategy is a "surge" of some 20,000 troops into Afghanistan, to crush the enemy there. But a logistical nightmare awaits US planners, who must be uncomfortably aware that at the end of first Afghan War of 1839, of the total British force of some 16,000, only one man returned alive from Afghanistan.

Pakistani Taliban elements have stepped up attacks on the supply convoys that run through Pakistan to replenish US-Nato forces in Afghanistan. More than 500 vehicles were destroyed in the last year, and a number of times the supply line was closed temporarily.

The Taliban and Al Qaeda have steadily enlarged their influence in Pakistan, especially along the 1,900-km-long land route from the port of Karachi to Afghanistan. This vital supply route carries some 75 per cent of supplies and 40 per cent of fuel for the US-Nato forces in Afghanistan which goes by trucks from Karachi, through the Khyber Pass.

Pakistani trucking companies that move goods into Afghanistan halted operations late last year, because of attacks by militants. Late last year, a big attack in the Peshawar area destroyed about 160 trucks bound for Afghanistan. Many trucks and their loads are looted in broad daylight, and their drivers killed or kidnapped. Drivers of the convoys are often suspected of complicity with the raiders, and the goods are then sold on the Peshawar black market.

Most of the fighting rages along the border region with Pakistan. As invaders throughout history have learned, closing the Khyber Pass causes a logistic nightmare for even the largest army.

The alternative route leading from Karachi to the Afghan city of Kandahar through the north-western Pakistan town of Chaman, has also come under attack recently. The Taliban's tactics are similar to those used by Mujahideen guerrillas in the 1980s who crippled the Soviet Army by attacking supply convoys.

Worsening situation

This has worsened the logistics situation for the US-Nato forces in Afghanistan. Matters have been made worse by the denial of the Manas air base in Kyrgyzstan to the US forces, as a result of a dispute with the Kyrgyz government, though some see a Russian hand behind this setback.

The contemplated surge in troop strength raises the question of how they will be supplied in the face of the deteriorating supply situation through Pakistan. The initial increase of 17,000 troops will need supply capacity of more than 100 containers a day. About 38,000 American troops are currently in Afghanistan, and the US intends to increase that number to as many as 60,000 to combat an intensifying Taliban insurgency.

Up to 90 per cent of American military ground cargo, which consists of non-lethal supplies such as food, fuel, water and construction materials, currently flows through Pakistan.

Apart from the ground cargo, all lethal and sensitive US military supplies, as well as all personnel,

must go to Afghanistan by air. This includes ammunition, weapons and vehicles with sensitive communications and other equipment.

Air cargo demands and costs will increase tremendously as fresh troops move into Afghanistan.

For example, one Stryker brigade of 3,900 personnel will mean transporting 15,000 tonnes of material. At \$14,000 per tonne, the air transport cost for one brigade alone would be \$210 million.

Clearly the “surge” will call for a massive logistical effort, and if the supply line is by air, the costs could be far greater than anticipated.

Russia has offered railway routes for moving non-lethal goods. But trains travelling from Russia to Afghanistan via the Russia-Kazakhstan-Uzbekistan route could be charged extortionate and unpredictable Customs and transit fees.

This route also has to cross the Hindu Kush mountain range through the 2.4 km long Salang Tunnel at 11,000 feet, which is subject to snow avalanches, and is vulnerable to attacks.

The northern route via the Russian rail system, if operational, could handle about 20 per cent of the ground cargo destined for the US military in Afghanistan, or about 100 20-foot containers a week, compared with about 500 a week through Pakistan. Fuel has to be transported in tankers. Estimates indicate that over 100 fuel trucks need to arrive in Afghanistan each day to meet the US troop’s fuel needs.

The Taliban attacks on the supply line can strangle any surge which will need some 3,500 tonnes of fuel and 250 tonnes of water per day.

Uzbek, Tajik route

To find a solution, last month Rear Admiral Harnitchek, a senior officer in the US logistics service, was in Tajikistan to secure a deal that will allow around 200 containers of supplies to start flowing each week from Uzbekistan, into Tajikistan and then on to Afghanistan.

These two countries supplied the Russian troops during their nine-year stay in Afghanistan, and the US army has already built a 700-metre bridge across the Amu Darya river, on the border with Tajikistan. But there are dangers in becoming reliant on Tajikistan and Russia, which is suspected of using \$2.1 billion in aid to pay Kyrgyzstan to stop US access to the vital Manas logistics base. The supply line through Pakistan could be protected by paying off potential attackers, but this strategy may not work if the enemy pays more or is ideologically motivated.

Thus the struggle against Taliban-Al Qaeda in western Pakistan becomes a necessary condition for winning the war in Afghanistan, and the Taliban have realised this. Conversely, cutting the supply line would lead to the forces in Afghanistan withering away without supplies.

Geopolitics

Recently, Abdullah Sa’id, a commander of al Qaeda’s paramilitary forces that operate in Pakistan and Afghanistan confirmed al Qaeda and the Taliban’s aim is to interdict Nato supply lines in Pakistan and force the Western countries to rely on Central Asian nations for logistical supply lines. He also said that al Qaeda has training camps in North-Eastern Afghanistan, in Helmand province, and in Pakistan’s tribal areas.

In addition, any development that causes a shift of Pakistani forces to the Indian border would further increase the vulnerability of US-Nato supply lines through Pakistan. The same would happen in the case of a failing Pakistani state, with Taliban gaining wider and deeper control in the country.

Alternative supply routes could be through Iran, through the Iranian port of Chah Bahar on the Persian Gulf, to Herat.

This is a very good reason why the Obama administration should move rapidly ahead in normalising relations with that country, unpalatable as it may be.

The recent decision of the US to join the P5+1 nuclear talks with Iran is a welcome step. Similarly, Iran has been included in the US-proposed “contact group” on Afghanistan. Israeli hardliners have been alarmed at what they see as US concessions to Iran, but Iran’s geostrategic importance cannot be denied.

Time is running out and options seem to be very limited for solving the logistical problems of the US-Nato forces. Meanwhile, every day brings news of further Taliban advances in Pakistan. The ghosts of the past Afghan conflicts are coming back to haunt the coalition forces.

(The author is a former Ambassador to Cuba and Greece. blfeedback@thehindu.co.in)

Related Stories:

[Afghanistan at the crossroads](#)

[Af-Pak in full throttle!](#)

[Pakistan, US and the Afghanistan quagmire](#)

© Copyright 2000 - 2008 The Hindu Business Line