

# Supplying war in Afghanistan: the frictions of distance

[opendemocracy.net/derek-gregory/supplying-war-in-afghanistan-frictions-of-distance](http://opendemocracy.net/derek-gregory/supplying-war-in-afghanistan-frictions-of-distance)

Derek  
Gregory

Pakistan has said NATO's supply convoys can cross the Afghan border so long as America's drones do not. Though the expanded use of cyberwarfare, covert special forces and drones is designed to overcome the frictional problems of waging war from a distance, logistics still matter. The world is not flat - even for the US military.

## Impasse over the Khyber

Andrew Bacevich has recently argued that Obama's determination to expand the use of drones and deploy covert special forces around the world heralds another 'new American way of war' that is busily 'shredding any remaining restraints on waging war'. [i] In too many ways I think Bacevich is right, though revelations about American involvement in the development of two major viral probes, Stuxnet and Flame, designed to attack Iran's nuclear program, means we need to add cyberwarfare to the incendiary mix. [ii] Yet the development of these three modalities is not only about waging 'war in the shadows', as many commentators besides Bacevich have convincingly claimed. The dispute over Pakistan's protracted refusal to re-open its border with Afghanistan to NATO convoys shows that these changes are also designed to overcome the frictional problems of waging war from a distance. It's high time to consider these issues in detail too.



Source, Defence Imagery. Credit, Brian A. Lautenslager, U.S. Marine Corps. Public Domain. Supply trucks in Afghanistan.

Pakistan closed the border after NATO helicopters and an AC-130 gunship attacked two of its military checkpoints at Salala near Peshawar on 26 November 2011, killing 24 soldiers and wounding another 13. Twin investigations by the US military and NATO claimed that close air support had been called in by a joint US-Afghan Special Forces patrol which had come under fire from Pakistan as it entered a village on the Afghan side of the border. While the incident was 'regretted', the reports concluded that their forces did not knowingly fire on the Pakistan posts and that both sides shared responsibility for poor co-ordination and communication. Pakistan rejected the findings, and the Pakistani parliament has declared that the border can only be re-opened if the United States apologises for the attack and – in a sideswipe at the signature mode of contemporary war at a distance – if its drone strikes in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) are halted. In short, American supplies can cross the border on condition

that its Predators and Reapers do not. The view of the government in Islamabad is less straightforward – not surprisingly, given its ambivalent role in the drone wars – and Foreign Minister Hina Rabbani Khar has admitted that Pakistan has a substantial interest in re-opening the ground lines of communication. One of the principal demands is that the transit fee paid by the United States should increase from \$250 per truck to \$5,000 per truck. No transit fee was imposed for the first eight years of the war in Afghanistan, but Islamabad argues that the increased fee is necessary to meet the cost of infrastructure repair, scanning, inspection and other services – though it has evidently also calculated the new fee with a close eye on the cost of shipping supplies by alternative routes. US Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta has rejected the proposal and insisted that ‘we’re not about to get gouged in the price’, but the resumption of drone strikes in the FATA makes it plain that more literal, visceral forms of gouging by the United States will no longer be held in check by the dispute. The CIA-directed attacks had been scaled back such that from 30 March until 22 May this year there were three American drone strikes in the FATA. But between 22 May and 3 June there have been eight strikes that killed at least 55 people. One US intelligence officer complained that ‘the politics of getting the [Ground Lines of Communication] into Afghanistan has trumped the targeting of bad guys in Pakistan’s tribal areas’ but confirmed that the attacks would now resume.<sup>[iii]</sup>

Partly for this reason there is considerable opposition in Pakistan to re-opening the lines of communication at *any* price. The drone strikes have burrowed deep into domestic politics, and there is a chronic tension between the government in Islamabad helping to supply the war in Afghanistan while publicly condemning its extensions across the border – a difficulty that has only been partly resolved by Pakistan’s behind-the-scenes complicity in providing local intelligence and, for a time, bases for the attacks. Domestic objections to the drone strikes have focused on their violation of Pakistani sovereignty and on civilian casualties, but the Obama administration has tried to sidestep both by treating its operations in FATA as a covert campaign that is, remarkably, both legal and only to be discussed off the record and by insisting, no more plausibly, that the strikes are so surgically precise that they cause no civilian casualties at all. But the presence of the NATO convoys and the violence that attends them is even less secret than the drone strikes, and this has added two other loads of fuel to the opposition bonfire. Some critics object to what Rafia Zakaria has tartly called the ‘weaponizing’ of Pakistan’s territory. In an op-ed in *Dawn*, one of Pakistan’s most widely read English-language newspapers, she noted that the convoys have been the targets of repeated militant attacks, so that ‘what supplies a war becomes part of a war’.<sup>[iv]</sup> There is also vocal condemnation of the war in Afghanistan itself; the Difa-i-Pakistan (Defence of Pakistan) Council, a coalition of right-wing religious parties, has organised angry demonstrations in Karachi, Lahore and other cities and threatened attacks on NATO convoys if the border is reopened, while Imran Khan’s centrist PTI, the Pakistan Movement for Justice Party, has announced that it would only agree to the border being reopened if it ‘facilitates the withdrawal of foreign troops from our region’.<sup>[v]</sup> This last is much on the collective mind of NATO too, which has redoubled the significance of the border closure. The problem is now not only, or even primarily how to get NATO supplies in to Afghanistan, but how to get its equipment *out* as the draw-down accelerates over the next two years.



Credit, Sgt Russel Gilchrist/US Army. Public Domain. A supply convoy

## Military logistics

Logistics, then, still matter and, contrary to what Thomas Friedman once proclaimed, the world isn't flat – even for the US military. Less than twelve months after Friedman published the first edition of his 'brief history of the twenty-first century', a premature and purblind celebration of the death of distance, Halvard Buhaug and Nils Petter Gleditch explored the distance of death and concluded that 'the largest obstacles to remote military operations relate to transportation and logistics.' [vi] Military historians would not be surprised and neither, I suspect, would military commanders. In his classic study of supplying ground forces Martin van Creveld argued that 'logistics make up as much as nine tenths of the business of war' – and 'business', as we will see, is exactly the word. Creveld's thesis was a simple one. Before 1914 armies had to live off the land they traversed, and 'could only be fed as long as they kept moving' because otherwise they would exhaust the local supplies of food and fodder. As late as 1870 ammunition formed less than 1 per cent of all supplies. But in the first months of the First World War the proportion of ammunition to those other supplies was reversed, and as 'the products of the machine – shells, bullets, fuel, sophisticated engineering materials – finally superseded those of the field' so it became 'relatively easy to support an army while it was standing still, [but] almost impossible to do so when it was moving fast.' In Creveld's view, modern warfare became 'shackled by immense networks of umbilical cords' and was effectively frozen in place. [vii]

Since the 'war to end all wars', however, war has not exactly stood still. Although the US Defense Logistics Agency rather quaintly describes its mission in terms of a supply chain extending 'from factory to foxhole', it is, above all, the mobility of military violence that is central to the conduct of late modern war. But Creveld is adamant that since 1945 the operational freedom of modern ground forces has not markedly increased, not least because their prized mobility is absolutely dependent on supplies of petrol and gasoline. Since the end of the Second World War the use of petroleum-based fuels by the US military has soared, and as its stripped-down forces have been expected to do more with less (through technological change and outsourcing) so the fuel expended per soldier has increased by 175 per cent to an average of 22 gallons (83 litres) per day. [viii] As Obama had US forces 'surge' into Afghanistan in 2009 so ISAF's daily fuel consumption rocketed from two million to over four million litres a day. Given these volumes, it is scarcely surprising that the death-dealing capacities of the US military and its allies should have been tied in knots by 'umbilical cords' far more convoluted than Creveld could ever have imagined.

There are three main supply networks to be disentangled in turn. All of them are ground lines of communication. Air transportation is extremely, usually prohibitively expensive, and only four airports in Afghanistan are accessible to non-military aircraft, so that until 2011 only 20 per cent of cargo was flown in. Similarly, onward delivery to combat outposts and forward operating bases has usually only involved airdrops if other options are too dangerous. Still, by the start of 2010 around 30-40 per cent of bases were being supplied by air because the Taliban controlled much of Highway 1, the ring road that loops between Afghanistan's major cities, and its IED attacks on NATO and Afghan forces were increasingly effective. The high cost of airdropping pallets of fuel, ammunition, water and supplies has imposed all sorts of fuel economies on the military as it attempts to reduce its carbon footprint – 'troops have learned to sip, not guzzle' – but it is still the case that, as one US pilot put it, 'we're going to burn a lot of gas to drop a lot of gas'. According to some estimates it can cost up to \$400 a gallon to deliver fuel by air. [ix]

## Pakistan Ground Lines of Communication

The first network is known as the Pakistan Ground Lines of Communication (PGLOC). US troops are airlifted to Afghanistan, but until recently most military supplies and equipment arrived at Karachi's Port Qasim using commercial shipping lines like APL, Maersk and Hapag-Lloyd. They were then trucked 2,000 kilometres through Pakistan by thousands of local contractors, whose jingle-trucks and tankers took ten days or more to complete the journey into Afghanistan. They crossed the border either via Quetta, through the Chaman gate in Baluchistan and on to Kandahar or via Peshawar, through the Torkham gate at the Khyber Pass and on to Bagram and Kabul. From 2008, however, and even more insistently with the surge of US troops that started the following year, the integrity of the supply chain came under increasing threat from insurgent attacks and border closures.



Pakistan Taliban attacks on the convoys escalated: on 18 November 2008 23 commercial trucks were attacked in the Khyber area, and on 7 December 2008 in the single biggest strike on the supply chain in seven years 160 trucks were destroyed at two terminals near Peshawar. The Pentagon downplayed their significance, claiming that the attacks had 'no direct bearing on our immediate combat capabilities'. But the Taliban continued torching hundreds of tankers and trucks over the next three years outside Islamabad, Quetta, Peshawar and elsewhere. By February 2009 General Duncan McNabb, commander of US Transportation Command, reported that 130 Pakistani drivers had been killed on the route. And in contrast to the Pentagon's optimism, he told a Congressional committee that 'If you ask me what I worry about at night, it is the fact that that our supply chain is constantly under attack.' [x]



Credit, Tech. Sgt. Efren Lopez/U.S. Air Force. Public Domain. A jingle-truck at Kandahar Air Base

The Pakistan Army provided little or no security for the convoys, but as part of a renewed offensive against the Taliban and other insurgent groups it closed the border crossing at Torkham in December 2008 and again in January 2009. The Pentagon made light of these actions too, and in fact welcomed the temporary closures as a means of 'clearing out' the trouble spots. Even when the border was closed in retaliation for US incursions, first in September 2008 and again in January 2010, these were short-term measures and the Pentagon remained outwardly unperturbed. By 2009 somewhere between 80 and 90 per cent of US surface cargo was being shipped through the PGLOC. But the vulnerability of the supply chain, together with the need to increase its capacity to support the surge, had in fact persuaded the Pentagon – for all its bravado – that it needed greater flexibility, and the US Defense Logistics Agency had been casting around for alternative routes. Since the prolonged closure in November last year – and in the face of continuing Taliban attacks against stranded convoys in Pakistan – this new series of routes across Europe has become absolutely vital to military operations in Afghanistan: and to NATO's exit from them.

## Northern Distribution Network

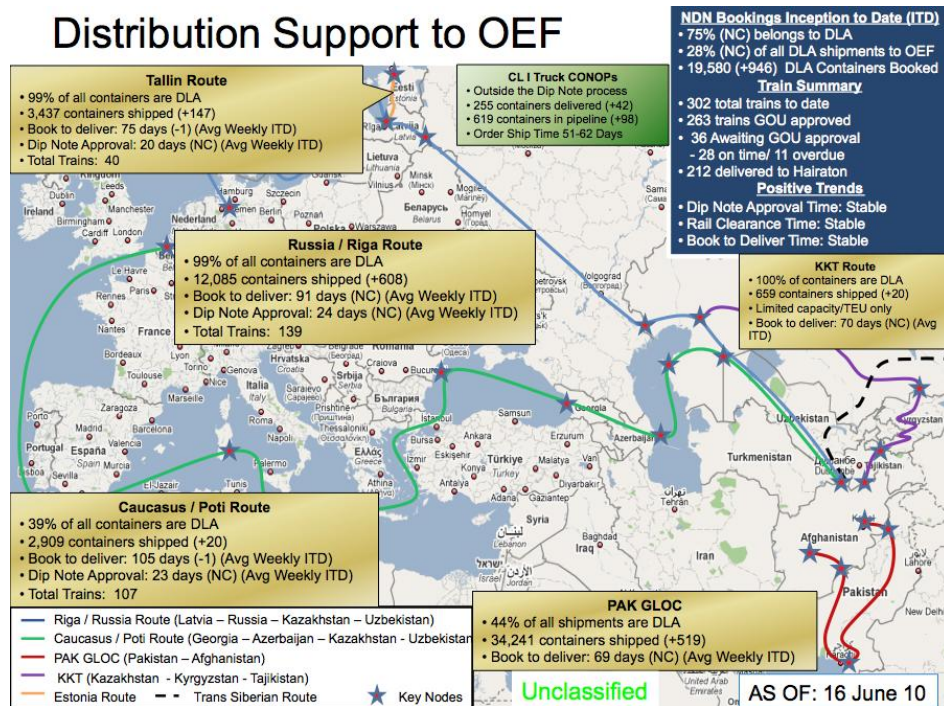
This second network came to be known as the Northern Distribution Network (NDN). Trial shipments started in September 2008 when private contractors transported ten containers of 'non-lethal' supplies from Germany to Afghanistan. Regular deliveries started in May 2009, and the network soon evolved into a ramifying web of commercial routes from Baltic ports like Riga, Tallin and Klaipeda, the Black Sea port of Poti, and US bases like Germersheim in Germany, through Russia or across the Caucasus to Central Asian states and eventually into Afghanistan. [xi]

But the route is not without geopolitical snares. The strategic role of Russia's railways has played an important part in muting Washington's criticism of Moscow, but it is the NDN's dependence on Uzbekistan – through which more than 80 per cent of its traffic rumbles – that is the most acute. As a stream of US military officers, emissaries and diplomats passed through Tashkent, including US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, so the Karimov regime's dismal record on human rights was eclipsed by Obama's determination to wage what he once saw as 'the good war' in Afghanistan; now, as David Trilling reports, the Pentagon is actively 'whitewashing the Karimov regime's abuses'. [xii] In January 2012 the Obama administration quietly waived the ban on US military assistance to Uzbekistan that had been in force to varying degrees since 2003 in order to support Karimov's 'counter-terrorist' programme. The resumption is provisional and subject to periodic review, but although the new agreement does exclude weapons and ammunition it includes body armour and other 'protective' equipment, night-vision goggles and thermal-imaging sensors that, according to Alex Cooley, are 'as likely to be used to target domestic opponents as ... [for the] publicly stated purpose of guarding these supply lines'. [xiii]

These odious geopolitical compromises have yielded fruit. By July 2010 the proportion of surface cargo being shipped through Pakistan had fallen to around 60 per cent, with the NDN accounting for the remaining 40 per cent. At the start of this year the United States announced that it planned to increase the flow until the NDN was delivering 750 of the 1,100 containers currently shipped to Afghanistan each week – the route already accounts for 85 per cent of fuel – but the protracted closure of the PGLOC has steadily increased the pressure. [xiv] It is far from clear that the system can withstand the demands now being placed upon it. The network is circuitous, which makes deliveries correspondingly slow (30 days minimum, but usually much longer: see map). And as the volume of traffic has increased, the journey from the railhead at Hairatan on the Uzbekistan border has slowed to a dangerous crawl. It used to take a truck a day to travel over the Salang Pass at the top of the Hindu Kush down to Kabul, but the increased traffic has severely degraded the roadbed and the tunnel. Truckers have to take turns to pass north or south through the tunnel on alternate days, and there are frequent delays caused by trucks tipping over or getting stuck, so that the journey now often takes 8-10 days. [xv] The NDN is also very expensive. Estimates for April–September 2011 put the average cost of shipping a standard 20-foot container by truck and rail via the NDN at \$12,367 compared with \$6,700 by truck via the PGLOC. These costs have been compounded by the increased volume switched from the PGLOC to the NDN, so that by January 2012 the Pentagon was paying six times more to get its supplies to Afghanistan (\$104 million per month, compared to \$17 million per month). [xvi]

There are also substantial issues of corruption concealed in these base figures. The Karimov regime has been determined to profit financially as well as politically from its strategic location – the Senate Appropriations Committee described it as a 'potential gravy train of graft' – and the NDN has encouraged what Cooley calls 'local rent-seeking' by state officials who 'have collected a windfall in fees through local subcontractors and demands for "informal payments" at the border.' [xvii] On 4 June 2012 the United States concluded an agreement with Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan that will permit it to reverse the flow through the NDN so that it can withdraw its equipment from Afghanistan. Although this has been advertised as a powerful means of leveraging Pakistan to re-open its border to NATO convoys, it is perfectly clear – to Islamabad and to Washington – that a failure to do so will exact a high price from both parties. There are reports that Uzbekistan will increase its transit fees by up to 50 per cent for the reverse flow. [xviii]

# Distribution Support to OEF



Credit, US Defence Logistics Agency. Public Domain. Supply lines to Afghanistan

## Inside Afghanistan

These two transnational supply chains both end at the main logistics hubs at Bagram and Kandahar, from where supplies have to be delivered to over 400 military bases scattered across Afghanistan. From the very beginning of the US-led invasion, Pentagon planners were haunted by the failure of the Soviet occupation between 1979 and 1989. The Red Army depended on ground lines of communication too, with long convoys snaking through mountain passes and along narrow roads protected by helicopters and armoured vehicles. The *mujahideen* were so successful in interdicting the convoys that movement was restricted to daytime, military bases had to be hastily constructed along the roads for refuelling, repair and overnight security, and most offensive operations were tied to within 100 km of supply depots. On some accounts the Red Army was obliged to devote 75 per cent of its force structure to protecting its supply routes. For all their successes, however, the *mujahideen* had their own problems. Not only were their supply lines vulnerable to Soviet attack but when their pick-up trucks and mules moved from one area to another they had to pay a 10 per cent toll to local power-brokers. In consequence, Lester Grau writes, 'by 1984 the war was primarily a logistics war with each side trying to strangle the other'. [xix]

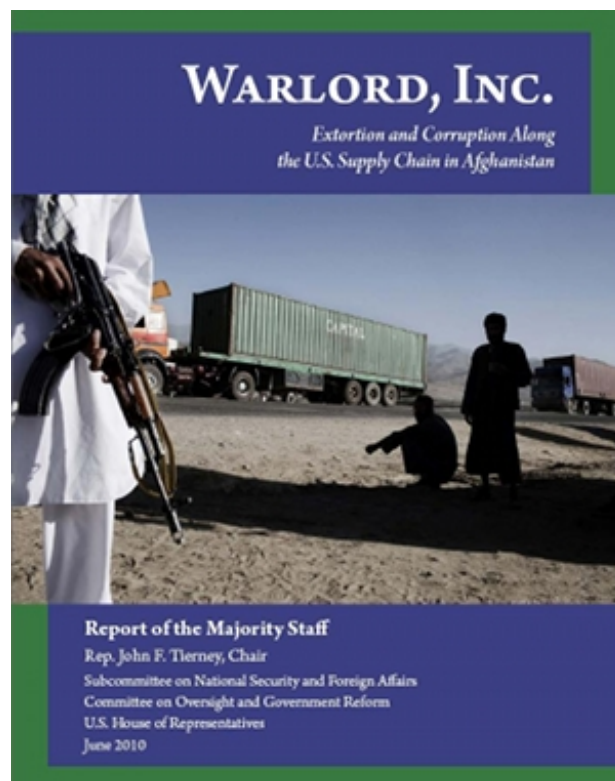
In order to avoid these problems, the Pentagon decided to rely on private contractors to manage and to provide security for the internal supply chain. This degree of outsourcing was unprecedented, but it was intended to free up troops to conduct offensive operations against the Taliban and other insurgent groups, while at the same time – as part of a 'security-development' nexus that emerged from the new counterinsurgency doctrine – to stimulate the local economy and win over the population. [xx] On both counts money was turned into a weapons system, part of an ongoing financialization of the battlespace, but it is one that can easily backfire. It was known to be a high-risk strategy – though it was assumed that most of the risks would be borne by local truckers and escorts: another version of the 'risk-transfer' war beloved of militaries in the global North – because, as the revised Counterinsurgency Field Manual warned, 'logistic providers are now no longer the tail but the nose of a counterinsurgent force' and for this very reason 'logistic units are perceived by insurgents as high-payoff targets and potential sources of supplies; [counterinsurgency] lines of communications (LOCs) are a main battle area for insurgents.' [xxi] So they are; but neither the planners in the Pentagon nor the authors of the manual could have imagined how that 'battle area' would be transformed by the business of war.

Pilfering and a host of other scams were endemic to the PGLOC, and there were multiple ways in which NATO



military supplies (including fuel) reached the black market in Pakistan. There were even reports of drivers selling their loads, setting fire to their tankers and blaming insurgents. But the economic model that emerged in Afghanistan was of a different order. As the volume of military supplies increased in lockstep with the surge of US troops, so the Pentagon decided to streamline most of its purchasing agreements with individual local contractors into a single consolidated contract divided between eight companies. The new system was known as Host Nation Trucking, and when it came into effect in May 2009 its operating companies were responsible for 6,000-8,000 truck missions a month delivering food, fuel, supplies and ammunition. [xxii] When the contract was originally announced in March 2009 it had been capped at \$380 million; by July it had swollen to \$2.16 billion. The responsibility for security was devolved to the prime contractors who subcontracted (or spun off) private security companies to provide an armed escort, but these were civilian convoys even though they were supplying military bases: unlike military convoys, they were unable to call in close air support if they were attacked, there were supposed to be strict limits on the weapons they could use to defend themselves, and in such circumstances they were instructed 'to egress the area as rapidly as possible'. [xxiii]

But the reality turned out to be markedly different. Just six months after the new contract became operational the *Nation* published a sensational report by Aram Roston describing how this contracting bazaar had turned into what he called a 'grotesque carnival' in which the United States had ended up funding the very forces its troops were fighting. [xxiv] Prompted by Roston's investigation a six-month Congressional inquiry reached exactly the same conclusion in June 2010. Although the Pentagon restricted the subcommittee's access to key military personnel, the majority report found overwhelming evidence to support Roston's allegations. Within two days of the contract starting there had been incident reports and e-mails from some contractors about shakedowns and protection payments, but no action was taken and no effective oversight put in place. The report described how a typical convoy of 300 supply trucks travelling from Kabul to Kandahar on Highway 1 would be escorted by 400-500 private security guards, riding in pick-up trucks and SUVs and armed with heavy machine-guns and rocket-propelled grenades. The main escort provider was Commando Security, run by 'Commander Ruhullah'. 'The US-supply chain operates on his schedule,' the report found, and 'his local sub-commanders will wait several days to gather as many trucks as possible before moving, even if some trucks are days or weeks overdue at their destination.' For what was nominally a three-day journey, Ruhallah charged as much as \$1,500 for each truck, depending on the size of the convoy and the nature of the load; his men escorted roughly 3,500 supply trucks every month. [xxv]



The figures, and the profits they implied, were extreme but not unusual, and the official investigation – published as *Warlord, Inc.* [xxvi] – concluded that the principal private security contractors under Host Nation Trucking were ‘warlords, strongmen, commanders and militia leaders’. The power exerted by these men is rooted in their ability to control territories and to extract monopoly rents and tolls from those who travel through them. Ruhullah exacted a brutal revenge on anyone who meddled with convoys under his protection, but there have been allegations that men like him (and including him) have kept the demand for their services high by attacking their rivals and even staging attacks on their own convoys. The commander of NATO forces in southern Afghanistan told Dexter Filkins that ‘it would be my expectation that people might create their own demand’ in precisely this way. [xxvii] Many of these ‘strongmen’ have complex relationships with the government in Kabul and with the Taliban, and some private security providers were alleged to have paid as much as 60 per cent of their profits to insurgent or criminal groups for ‘protection’ and safe passage. US military officials in Kabul had told Roston that ‘a minimum of 10 per cent of the Pentagon’s logistics contracts – hundreds of millions of dollars – consists of payments to insurgents.’ [xxviii] The initial Pentagon response to the report was numbingly complacent: senior officers had no knowledge of any of it, and even if they had all that mattered to commanders on the ground was that the supplies got through. But a subsequent Army investigation, hurriedly established as the Congressional subcommittee was formulating its report, eventually found ‘documented, credible evidence ... of involvement in a criminal enterprise or support for the enemy’ by four of the original eight prime contractors who were involved in what Task Force 2010 called the ‘reverse money laundering’ of at least \$360 million. [xxix]

It took more than a year – until August 2011 – for the Host Nation Trucking contract to be cancelled and replaced by a new National Afghan Trucking contract. Yet more than half of the 20 contractors involved in the new scheme had been prime or subcontractors under the previous contract, and convoy security was still in the hands of private contractors. John Tierney, the Democrat chair of the original Congressional inquiry, was exasperated: ‘We are right back to the same people that were involved in the problem that instigated the investigation.’ [xxx]

## Supplying war

Over the last decade a new political economy of war has come into view. We have become aware of late modern war’s proximity to neoliberalism through privatisation and outsourcing (‘just-in-time war’) and its part in the contemporary violence of accumulation by dispossession. [xxxi] The rapacious beneficiaries of the business of war have been swollen by the transformation of the military-industrial complex into what James der Derian calls the military-industrial-media-entertainment network (MIME-NET). [xxxii] And the very logic of global financial markets has been subsumed in what Randy Martin calls today’s ‘derivative wars’. [xxxiii] These are all vital insights, but it is important not to overlook the persistence of another, older and countervailing political economy that centres on the persistence of the friction of distance even in the liquid world of late modernity. To repeat: the world is not flat – even for the US military. In a revealing essay on contemporary logistics Deborah Cowen has shown how the United States has gradually extended its ‘zone of security’ outwards, not least through placing border agents around the world in places like Port Qasim so that the US border becomes the last not the first line of defence through which inbound flows of commodities must pass. She shows, too, how the securitization security of the supply chain has involved new legal exactions and new modes of militarization that materially affect port access, labour markets and trucking systems. [xxxiv] Affirming the developing intimacy, truly the *liaison dangereuse* between military and commercial logistics, the US Defense Logistics Agency envisages a similar supply chain for its outbound flows that aim to provide ‘uninterrupted support to the warfighter’ (‘full spectrum global support’) and a ‘seamless flow of materiel to all authorized users.’ And yet, as I hope I have demonstrated, this is the ‘paper war’ that, 180 years ago, Clausewitz contrasted so scathingly with ‘real war’. The friction of distance constantly confounds the extended supply chain for the war in Afghanistan. [xxxv] This is no simple metric (‘the coefficient of distance’) or physical effect (though the difficult terrain undoubtedly plays a part). Rather, the business of supplying war produces volatile and violent spaces in which – and through which – the geopolitical and the geo-economic are still locked in a deadly embrace.



---

[i] Andrew Bacevich, 'The new American way of war', *London Review of Books* blog at <http://www.lrb.co.uk/blog>, 13 February 2012; Andrew Bacevich, 'Unleashed: globalizing the global war on terror', at <http://www.tomdispatch.com>, 29 May 2012

[ii] David Sanger, Obama order sped up cyberattacks against Iran, *New York Times*, 1 June 2012; David Sanger, *Confront and conceal: Obama's secret wars and surprising use of American power* (New York: Crown, 2012).

[iii][http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2012/05/us\\_drones\\_kill\\_5\\_in.php#ixzz1wCikscL9](http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2012/05/us_drones_kill_5_in.php#ixzz1wCikscL9)

[iv] Rafia Zakaria, 'A lesser people', *Dawn*, 16 May 2012, at <http://dawn.com/2012/05/16/a-lesser-people>.

[v] Mahvish Ahmad, 'Why Pakistan hasn't reopened NATO supply lines', *Christian Science Monitor*, 20 May 2012, at <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Asia-South-Central/2012/0520/Why-Pakistan-still-hasn-t-reopened-NATO-supply-lines>.

[vi] Thomas Friedman, *The world is flat: a brief history of the twenty-first century* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005); Halvard Buhaug and Nils Petter Gleditsch, 'The death of distance? The globalization of armed conflict', at <http://www.prio.no/sptrans/-830327507/2004npg003.pdf>

[vii] Martin van Creveld, *Supplying war: logistics from Wallenstein to Patton* (second edition) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

[viii] *Energy security: America's best defense* (Deloitte Development LLC, 2009) p. 3.

[ix] Nathan Hodge, 'US's Afghan headache: \$400-a-Gallon Gasoline', *Wall Street Journal*, 6 December 2011; Deborah Zabarenko, 'Sipping not guzzling fuel on Afghanistan's frontlines', Reuters, 10 May 2012. For comparison, a Deloitte study calculated that the US military bought gasoline for around \$2-3 per gallon but that the 'fully burdened' cost of delivering fuel by road (including convoy protection) increased this to \$45 per gallon: *Energy security*, p. 19. More generally: in FY2006 only 3,500,000 lbs of supplies were airdropped; by FY 2010 this had risen to 60,000,000 lbs and by FY 2011 to 80,000,000 lbs.

[x] 'US Transportation Command's (USTRANSCOM) Airlift, sealift and surface lift program', Joint Hearing before subcommittees of the Armed Services Committee, US House of Representatives, 25 February 2009. In addition to physical attacks, McNabb cited constant cyber-attacks on the logistics system – 'If you can figure out what people are doing logistically, you many times can figure out what they are doing' – but he provided no details.

[xi] Shahan Mufti, 'From Pakistan to Afghanistan, US finds convoy of chaos', *Bloomberg Business Week*, 14 December 2011 at <http://www.businessweek.com/magazine/from-pakistan-to-afghanistan-us-finds-convoy-of-chaos-12142011.html>

[xii] Craig Whitlock, 'US turns to other routes to supply Afghan war', *Washington Post*, 3 July 2011; David Trilling, 'Northern Distribution Nightmare', *Foreign Policy*, 6 December 2011 at [http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/12/06/afghanistan\\_resupply\\_nato\\_ndn](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/12/06/afghanistan_resupply_nato_ndn). Others are more calculating and far less critical. In a recent report the neoconservative Center for Strategic and International Studies trumpets: 'All states benefit greatly by hosting the supply line—the impact on bilateral relationships with the United States is in part constructive and positive. Russia's agreement to both aerial and overland resupply through its territory, and Uzbekistan's reengagement with America for similar transit, is proof of these encouraging developments': *The Northern Distribution Network and Afghanistan: Geopolitical challenges and opportunities* (January 2010) p.2.

[xiii] Stephen Zunes, 'Obama administration seeks to resume military aid to Uzbekistan dictator', at [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/stephen-zunes/obama-administration-seek\\_b\\_1087528.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/stephen-zunes/obama-administration-seek_b_1087528.html), 11 November 2011;

Nathan Hodge, 'US ends ban on aid to Uzbekistan', *Wall Street Journal*, 1 February 2012; Alex Cooley, 'Afghanistan: Don't Overlook the Other Regional Casualty' at <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/65448>, 23 May 2012. The administration claimed Uzbekistan had made 'limited progress' on human rights, but a Human Rights Watch report published the previous month swept away this offensive fig-leaf: see *No one left to witness: Torture, the failure of habeas corpus and the silencing of lawyers in Uzbekistan* (Human Rights Watch, 13 December 2011).

[xiv] While the proportion travelling through Pakistan had fallen the volume had increased as military operations in Afghanistan stepped up: for example, the shipments handled through the Peshawar terminals more than doubled in 2010.

[xv] Rod Nordland, 'US-Pakistan freeze chokes fallback route in Afghanistan', *New York Times*, 2 June 2012. There is also a constant risk from avalanches.

[xvi] 'US costs soar for new supply routes', Associated Press/ *Army Times*, 19 January 2012.

[xvii] Deirdre Tynan 'Uzbekistan: Tashkent's Shakedown Practices Hold Up NDN Traffic – Contractors', at <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/65056>, 27 February 2012.

[xviii] Sebastian Abbot, 'New US leverage seen in negotiations with Pakistan over supply route', Associated Press, 7 June 2012; Tyunan, 'Uzbekistan'.

[xix] Major Martha Granger, 'Moving an expeditionary force: three case studies in Afghanistan', School of Advanced Military Studies, US Army Command and General Staff College (2003), at <http://www.dtic.mil/cgi-bin/GetTRDoc?AD=ADA415877>; Lester Grau, 'The Soviet-Afghan War: a superpower mired in the mountains', *Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 17 (1) (2004), at <http://fmso.leavenworth.army.mil/documents/miredinmount.htm>

[xx] 'Sensitive' supplies remain the preserve of military convoys, so that even this degree of outsourcing has required the Army to dedicate over 30 per cent of its enlisted force in Afghanistan in 2011 to logistics operations ('force sustainment'): John Ryan, 'Enemies, weather imperil Afghan supply routes', *Defense News*, 15 May 2012.

[xxi] AFM 3-24: Counterinsurgency (2006) § 8.1 and §8.3.

[xxii] Afghanistan is repeatedly described as a 'host nation'; the conceit is evidently that, far from being invaded, Afghanistan is the host of a ghastly martial Olympics. Are we supposed to imagine countries around the world competing for the privilege of military occupation? I doubt that there will be a shortage of commercial sponsors.

[xxiii] Gary Motsek, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense (Program Support), before the Subcommittee on National Security & Foreign Affairs, US House of Representatives, 22 June 2010.

[xxiv] Aram Roston, 'How the US funds the Taliban', *The Nation*, 11 November 2009.

[xxv] Highway 1 is the infamous 'million-dollar-a-mile' highway whose construction is also widely believed to have been a source of Taliban funding: see Douglas Wissing, *Funding the enemy* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2012) pp. 93-4. The same is reportedly true of other highway construction projects: Alissa J. Rubin and James Risen, 'Costly Afghanistan road project is marred by unsavoury alliances', *New York Times*, 1 May 2011.

[xxvi] *Warlord Inc. Extortion and corruption along the US supply chain in Afghanistan*, Report of the Majority Staff, Subcommittee on National Security and Foreign Affairs, Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, US House of Representatives, June 2010 at <http://publicintelligence.info/Warlordinc.pdf>. Given the title, it is important to reflect on Keith Stanski's discussion of the very idea of a 'warlord': "So these folks are aggressive": an Orientalist reading of Afghan warlords', *Security dialogue* 40 (1) (2009) 73-94.

[xxvii] Dexter Filkins, 'Convoy guards in Afghanistan face an inquiry', *New York Times*, 6 June 2010.

[xxviii] See also Jake Sherman and Victoria DiDomenico, *The public cost of private security in Afghanistan*, Center on International Cooperation, New York University, September 2009. Ironically, 10 per cent was the 'toll' charged by power-brokers to allow the *mujahideen* to transport their supplies – many of them of course supplied by the US – during the guerilla war against the Soviet occupation.

[xxix] 'Funds begin as clean monies [and then], either through direct payments or through the flow of funds in the subcontractor network, the monies become tainted': see Karen de Young, 'US trucking finds reach Taliban, military-led investigation concludes', *Washington Post*, 24 July 2011.

[xxx] Karen de Young, 'US military awards contracts in Afghanistan to get money away from insurgents', *Washington Post*, 17 August 2011. See also the Subcommittee on National Security, Homeland Defense and Foreign Operations of the Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, House of Representatives, 15 September 2011. The subcommittee had difficulty in seeing how expanding the number of contractors would solve the problem, and it found that no legal action had been taken against any of the offending contractors and that there was little or no evidence that effective monitoring systems had been implemented.

[xxxii] David Harvey, *The new imperialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

[xxxiii] James der Derian, *Virtuous war: mapping the military-industrial-media-entertainment network* (New York: Routledge, second edition, 2009).

[xxxiiii] Randy Martin, *An empire of indifference: American war and the financial logic of risk management* (Durham NC and London UK: Duke University Press, 2007).

[xxxv] Deborah Cowen, 'A geography of logistics: market authority and the security of supply chains', *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 100 (2010) 1-21.

[xxxvi] Clausewitz did not directly address the friction of distance in his classic reflections *On war* (1832), but his discussion of the more general 'friction of war' – and the difference between 'war on paper' and what he called 'real war' – opened with an analogy with the obstacles facing a traveller on a journey that speaks directly to these issues.

Join Akala, Gina Miller, Jarvis Cocker, Nick Clegg, Michael Gove, Alistair Campbell, Helena Kennedy, doctors, nurses, community activists, a youth panel and many more this weekend for a broad, forward-looking debate on Brexit.

[Get your tickets now](#) with this openDemocracy discount code: **OPENDEMCONV**



**the  
convention**

THINK ANEW, ACT ANEW

Brexit & the Political Crash

MAY 12TH & 13TH  
CENTRAL HALL, WESTMINSTER

**THE VITAL DEBATE  
YOU NEED TO BE PART OF**

**BOOK HERE**



This article is published under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 3.0 licence. If you have any queries about republishing please [contact us](#). Please check individual images for licensing details.