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THE COLOSSAL LOGISTICAL TASK OF THE BRITISH WITHDRAWAL FROM AFGHANISTAN

Summary: The article is about the gigantic task of leaving Afghanistan till the end of 2014 from the perspective of British troops. First of all, in the introduction the background of the activities done by the coalition forces, will be shown for a reader. After that, the article presents the process of handling equipment used there, and possible ways for redeploying units back to the United Kingdom. As for the end, it will include a short view about the whole cost of this gigantic operation, which defined the region, and especially Afghanistan in the last decade.

Keywords: Afghanistan, NATO, British troops, Operation Herrick, withdrawal

INTRODUCTION

After the USA suffered the terrorist attacks on the 11th of September, 2001, the US government decided to launch an operation in Afghanistan in the same year. The reason was that this country was considered to be the main dwelling place of the terrorist organisations who executed this complex attack against US objects.

Later more and more NATO member countries joined this operation to help with decreasing the threat, the United Kingdom joined as well. The whole operation in the country was named ISAF, after abbreviation of International Security and Assistance Force. The deployment of United Kingdom is also running in the frame of ISAF, codenamed Operation Herrick, and all of British tasks concluded under this operation, and their area of responsibility is Regional Command Southwest (RC SW), which includes the provinces of Helmand and Nimroz. But also they have more forces in Kabul (RC East) and Kandahar (RC South). The map below shows ISAF regional commands and also their position in the country.

1. THE BACKGROUND OF THE ACTIVITIES IN AFGHANISTAN

The main pinned aim is to decrease the strength of terrorist organisations that are known as the Taliban, and at the same time aid reconstruction and development as well as providing security for the country, while they help to train the manpower for the Afghan National Army and also for the Afghan National Police to be able to keep these achievements after the withdrawal of coalition forces. This will happen continuously step by step, leaving the garrisons one by one, and finishing the operation is planned for the end of 2014, till most of the British units will have been brought back to their home country. Already they have decreased the number of their personnel, which is currently centralised in the main operating base Camp Bastion, after the last forward operating base

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was closed on 11th May 2014. Of course the withdrawal does not mean that no units will stay there, because some of them will help as mentoring teams next year to help the Afghan forces to strengthen their capability for coping with challenges that always occur (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1. Regional Commands layout of ISAF in the first half of 2013

Source: <http://grognnews.blogspot.com/2013/04/current-isaf-placemat.html>, [downloaded on 15.05.2014].

During this long-term war that lasted more than a decade, thousands of pieces of equipment were needed for accomplishing the mission but after the decision to leave Afghanistan was announced by the US president Barack Obama in June 2011, the whole gigantic military task of the whole operation began. The number of British troops reached their peak in 2011 with around 10000 deployed personnel. Currently this number is around 5200 which means that they have been leaving Afghanistan gradually since then, but the main efforts came in 2013 when their manpower was still around 8000 personnel. According to this data during just over half a year they brought back 3000 of their men.

2. PROCESS AND WAYS OF REDEPLOYING EQUIPMENT

The main task apart from bringing their troops back is also handling all the equipment used there by them. Then the question arises – how could this be done in the most effective and easy way? This can happen in 3 ways, like transporting them back to the United Kingdom, selling or if could not be sold then giving them away, or destroying them. As for leaving, the process is going on gradually, as it was told earlier, which is according to the information announced at the closure of forward operating base Sterga, by Brigadier Martin Moore, a commander in duty of the current change of Britain's deployment, and has already been on the level of 60% (Source in references). In the selection process they handle their equipment one by one. First of all, every piece must be run through a complex computer programme which analyses that and then makes a decision

whether it is worth transporting back home or should be dealt with in the other 2 possible ways.

Transportation comes under consideration in the case of military materials, the coalition forces do not want it to get into bad hands, like the Taliban, but the equipment is also in a good condition so it is worth getting it home. If they decide about the way of transporting it back to the UK, then there are only restricted possibilities of methods to do that. Basically they would be able to do logistic process in all 3 ways. These are air, ground and shipping routes as well. The map below represents the supply routes of the USA to Afghanistan, but it can be valid also for the withdrawal in the near future, for the United Kingdom forces as well. As it is visible on the map, the main problem is the fact that Afghanistan is a landlocked country, so the chance of using shipping routes directly is impossible. There is only one way of redeploying equipment directly, with the use of air routes to the United Kingdom but this has the least chance, despite the fact that this is the fastest way but this is the most expensive way, as well. If the restricted transportation possibilities are not enough, the geopolitical status with the countries around Afghanistan worsens the possibilities. They still would be able to do that through Pakistan in a combined way of ground and shipping routes because there is the port of Karachi, which is the closest and most suitable port for doing this. Regardless of the fact, that Pakistan is not an enemy country, it is in special status with the coalition forces because of the incident that happened in November 2011 at the Afghan-Pakistani border when accidentally Pakistani soldiers were also killed in an air strike executed by the coalition forces targeting Taliban objects. This caused the Pakistani government to have less trust in these forces and resulted that they have not given them the permission for using the key Pakistani ground routes, on which one third of supplies had gone through earlier. With this fact they lost the most effective way of transportation.

Since then NATO have made agreements with countries lying north of Afghanistan, and could open the Northern Distribution Network, a system of supply lines (connected roads and railways) in countries such as, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Russia and then they can ship to Great Britain through the ports of the Baltic states, for example in Riga. But compared to the routes through Pakistan using this way resulted in increasing the costs by 5 times. Also nowadays there can be problems because of the current relations between Russia and NATO is deteriorating over the situation in Ukraine.

There is also another route avoiding Russia. This one is first heading north then in Kazakhstan it changes to ferry through the Caspian Sea, then goes west through Georgia, Turkey, Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary, Germany and other destinations. Another option is if the ground routes goes only to Turkey and from there through one of the ports positioned at the southern part of the country then the equipment can be shipped via the Mediterranean Sea, through the Strait of Gibraltar and the eastern part of Atlantic Ocean near Europe to one of the southern ports of the United Kingdom, such as Portsmouth, which is also one of the biggest home ports of the Royal Navy.

As for the ground routes they make only a small percentage of the whole transportation. The main reason is the time it takes, the rate of cost and effectiveness that is low, and lots of difficulties can threaten the transportation, such as huge amount of dangerous roads, mostly via high mountain roads, the adulterous geopolitical terrain, which also can be in short term periods changed, like in the case of Pakistan, Iran or Russia as well. But more transportation on ground routes requires extra security preparations, more personnel as security troops, and from all concerned countries their permission to use the routes. If one of them would not give this permission that route line could collapse totally (Fig. 2).

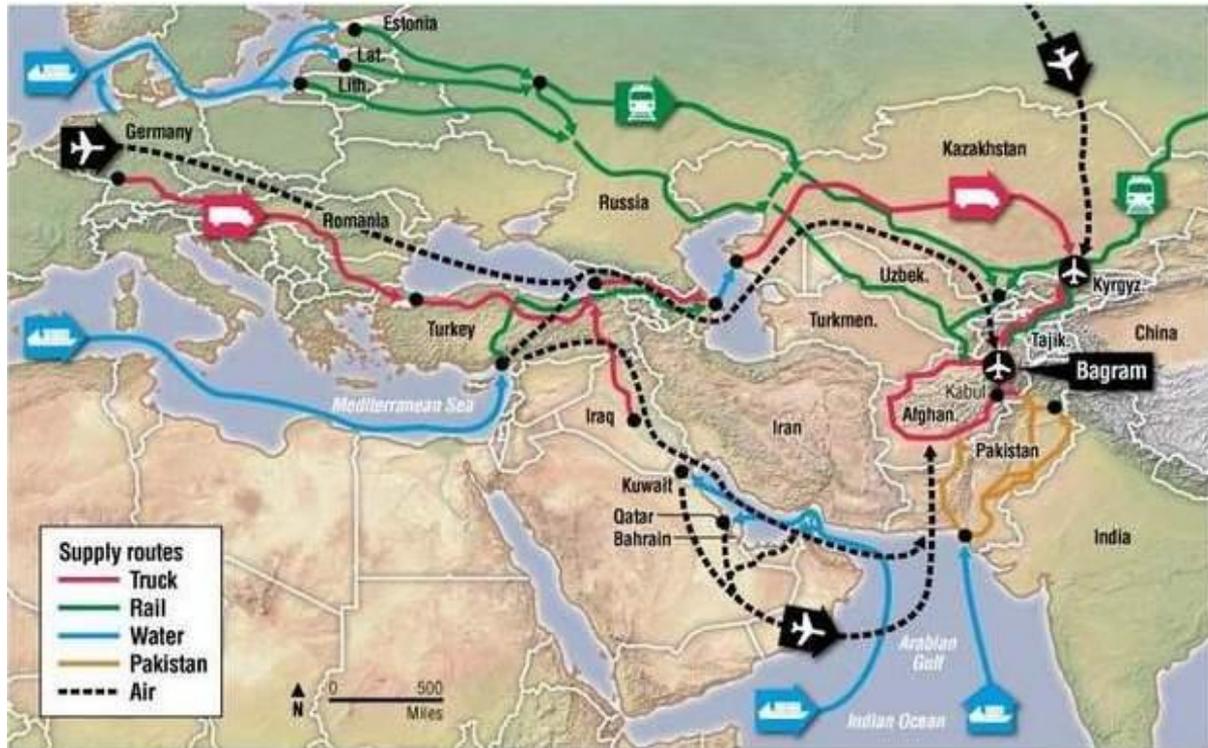


Fig. 2. The map of possible routes for withdrawing British troops

Source: <http://www.armytimes.com/article/20120410/NEWS/204100316/Supply-route-closure-impedes-Afghan-withdrawal>, [downloaded on 17.05.2014].

That is why the most preferred method is the combination of air and shipping routes. This has many possibilities, but at the same time it is also not the most expensive way of redeploying the huge amount of equipment. With this way the coalition forces also avoid threats against their very valuable war-like materials to get into bad groups, which is more risky to happen on ground routes. It does not require so much permission because of touching less national terrain, with the way of using international shipping lanes. The ways of combined air and shipping lines are also manifold. Firstly, equipment can be flown to the Persian Gulf or as it was said earlier to the southern part of Turkey from where it can be shipped. In both cases they have to avoid the air space of Iran because of political reasons but it is still easier than it would be on ground routes.

Other way of handling the equipment used in Afghanistan is leaving it in the country, which also has two subordinated ways: sale or gift. Most of the items planned to be left there are firstly offered to the local police or the military units. This offer includes wide range variety of equipment, for example a few hundred of vehicles, such as Land Rovers, and other SUVs, but they also offer MRAPs vehicles (*Mine-Resistant Ambush Protected*). *The bigger part of equipment is non war-like materials of military used things, such as kitchen units, generators, forklifts, tents or computers.*

If they cannot be sold, there is also an option in some cases to give free of charge to the local police or army if they want and accept them. If this way does not work, or they consider the equipment not suitable for these forces, or are afraid of giving them, the last way is to dispose it. This means scrapping the vehicles and/or exploding them by specialists. For this aim the US base Camp Leatherneck put in place a cutter to execute this process of handling equipment, which one is also shared with British logistic department.

The reason of leaving this equipment and selling it cheaper than the original price is money as it is still cheaper to the state budget than transporting it home, and in case of

many vehicles, they cannot be used in the home country for their original purpose which was originally made for. Also it is better in some cases instead of disposing them because it costs also money from the budget, while selling it, they can earn, even if it much less than necessary, but it is more cost-effective for the state budget. The Ministry of Defence also made it clear that they will leave everything in the country that is not cost-effective to bring home, in home environment it is hard to maintain and support technologically (for example in the case of MRAP vehicles) and they have also the less use. Another strong reason can be that vehicles are in such a disrepair status that repairing them would be more expensive than that equipment is worth basically, or it is impossible to do that.

In the perspective of costs there is only speculation, which is changing in the short term as well. It is caused by reasons such as the way of bringing these materials back is not very stable depending on the actual political terrain, but the rush of leaving Afghanistan makes the cost of transportation rise, which is induced by the relations of the big necessity from the contributing countries and the restricted transporting capabilities, that is why the process takes more time in spite of the full level of working.

On the ground of Ministry of Defence (Source in references) the total cost of withdrawal will have been approximately 300 million GBP/370 million EUR. This charge consists of transporting back 5200 troops, 50 aircraft (fixed and rotated winged type as well), around 3300-3500 vehicles and major equipment, 5500 normal equipment, and 400 tonnes of ammunition casings.

CONCLUSION

Withdrawing brought the biggest logistic task to the coalition forces they have in the last decades had. Drawing the number of deployed personnel cause not only financial problem for the participating countries, but the question "How can they do it on the most efficient way?" is the main part of the whole logistic process. The result has been promising so far, but it has not still come to the end, as the process is on the 60% level of the total according to the current commander Brigadier Martin Moore. Now as 40% still left from the whole they must fasten the process if they want to leave Afghanistan in the planned time. What we can know is that it has been and will have been a gigantic logistic process, which will cost a huge amount of money for the participating country, especially for the USA, which has the biggest deployed contingent, at the peak of around 100 000 personnel. But this process will be very expensive also for the British government, which achieved the peak number also in 2011 with around 10 000 deployed personnel and their whole required stuff, such as vehicles, camp stuffs, and non-military things as well.

As for the logistic process it gives a huge amount of knowledge about the method of large scale logistic planning, which can help in the future a lot not only in the military logistics, but also in the civilian logistic company, which can benefit from this tremendous amount of experience. For example, they can benefit from the IT systems which were developed and introduced firstly for such enormous tasks to be able to do that successfully, but they can be used also in smaller tasks because they can make the method much easier than it was earlier.

All in one, this redeploying process causes disadvantages like the financial questions, but also advantages, which will make a huge help in the close and far-future operational and civilian logistic planning, too.

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**KOŁOSALNE PRZEDSIĘWZIĘCIE LOGISTYCZNE
– WYCOFYWANIE ARMII BRYTYJSKIEJ Z AFGANISTANU**

***Streszczenie:** Artykuł opisuje z perspektywy brytyjskiej armii olbrzymie przedsięwzięcie, którym jest opuszczenie Afganistanu do końca 2014 roku. W pierwszej kolejności przedstawiono czytelnikowi zarys działalności sił koalicyjnych w Afganistanie. Kolejno, artykuł ukazuje sposoby porażenia sobie ze zgromadzonym sprzętem oraz przetruceniem jednostek wojskowych z powrotem do Wielkiej Brytanii. Ostatnia część artykułu zawiera krótką kalkulację kosztów tej ogromnej operacji, którą determinuje specyfika sytuacji w regionie oraz samym Afganistanie w ostatniej dekadzie.*

***Słowa kluczowe:** Afganistan, NATO, oddziały brytyjskie, operacja Herrick, odwrót*