

Fix the contractor system; NATO ran out of bombs; A clear acquisition career path is sorely needed

WAY BEYOND CAMP FOLLOWERS

The use of operational contractor support has been accelerating in the last decade, ever since former Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld declared soldiers were too expensive for support functions and he only wanted “trigger pullers” in uniform. Contractor personnel have deployed in countless forward missions, from food service to armed security.

A new Defense Science Board report, however, says while the Pentagon is highly dependent on OCS for just about any mission, it has an ad hoc, inconsistent, expensive, and dangerous approach to it. There’s no formal process for identifying how much is needed, how to efficiently activate OCS for war, and how much OCS will cost.

In “Contractor Logistics in Support of Contingency Operations,” dated June but released in late summer, a DSB task force led by Ronald L. Kerber said even though OCS dates back to the Revolutionary War, Pentagon leadership still “does not yet recognize [it] as a critical component of combat readiness” and has not shown any urgency in getting a handle on it. The panel noted, “For the majority of the duration of each contingency conflict, the number of contractor personnel was equal to or larger than the deployed military personnel. At one point there were over 160,000 contingency contractor personnel in Iraq.” The report has been two years in the making.

The panel said planning for use of OCS is inadequate; the risks to OCS personnel have never been formally addressed; contingency operations contracts are often “complex and costly” for both peacetime and wartime missions; and that there’s no system to audit such contracts in a timely manner. Overall, despite the military’s profound dependency of the US military on contractors who go forward with the armed forces, management of this critical element of combat capability is haphazard.

The panel offered six “major findings” regarding OCS.

First, the panel wants DOD to formally recognize OCS for the massive role it plays in any operation and to plan for it. In previous contingencies, “success was only achieved because funding was essentially unconstrained. This will not likely be the case in future operations.” Moreover, the widespread use of OCS without effective leadership “contributed to a level of waste, fraud, and abuse seemingly without long-term consequences.” There are a number of steps underway to confront the situation, but none have yet turned into a coherent policy, the DSB panel said. “The task force commends DOD for these efforts but offers a caution not to confuse activity with results,” it said.

Second, the Pentagon needs to recognize how crucial OCS is to anything it needs to do. This reliance is driven by the decreasing size of the uniformed force, the fact that “deployment rotation periods have increased, and force numbers are routinely capped for specific missions.” Also “modern warfare will increasingly require the use of new and complex equipment to surge and shrink the force at a high operating tempo and to respond rapidly.” OCS will have to make up the shortfalls.

It’s OK to be that dependent, the task force said, but it maintained that OCS remains “inappropriate” for “actions that determine or decide national and mission policy and objectives,

actions that determine or decide the value to the nation and the dollar amount to be obligated, and combat.”

Future success depends on OCS being “integrated” into defense planning, and the panel’s third recommendation called for doing this, given the likelihood of “unintended and undesired consequences” when it’s not planned for.

Fourth, there’s been no comprehensive risk assessment for contractor personnel, especially in the later phase of an operation—“stabilizing and enabling civil authority.” That has produced “unintended consequences” that have damaged US interests and hurt mission success. Examples include the public executions of contractors, and contractors behaving badly in ways that have cost the US dearly in various conflicts.

Management of OCS has often been “fragmented, inconsistent, and at times, ineffective,” the panel said, and its fifth recommendation was that DOD train contractors on what’s expected of them when deployed, and the ramifications of how they do their jobs and how they deal with local residents. Bad behavior paints a poor picture of US stewardship of taxpayer money and can do incalculable damage to a war effort, the group said.

The panel’s sixth major finding was that it’s urgent to develop a method to audit wartime contracts in a timely manner. Typically this is only done after contracts are completed, the panel said—too late to stop waste, fraud, or abuse in its tracks.

Eight recommendations were included in the report on how the Defense Department should establish—quickly—planning and oversight mechanisms for OCS. Among the recommendations were creating a three-star flag officer overseer for OCS. This would put the job on a par with the head of the Defense Logistics Agency.

Another recommendation urged the Secretary of Defense to recognize OCS “as part of the Total Force structure” and create a corps of specialists who know how to rapidly mobilize and contract for OCS. The remainder of the recommendations included detailed suggestions for how USD/AT&L should develop policy and tactics for use of OCS, how to implement an audit strategy, and how combatant commands should integrate OCS into their planning.

RECONNECTING AND RELOADING NATO

America’s European NATO allies ran out of munitions during the 2011 action in Libya and had to borrow from US stocks to keep the air campaign going. Since then, replenishing NATO’s air-to-ground weapons magazines has been like the old joke about the weather: Everybody talks about it, but no one seems to do anything about it.

With Crimea seized and Russian troops openly aiding pro-Moscow rebels in Ukraine, though, NATO seems to be taking the weather report seriously. In September, the head of NATO’s military committee, Danish Army Gen. Knud Bartels, told defense reporters in Washington that a Danish initiative to get NATO to pool its funds to buy weapons more cheaply and quickly has gotten traction.

Stocks are “beginning to grow,” Bartels said, and NATO nations are partnering to buy munitions in “a substantial amount.”



Breedlove said NATO Article V plans are again made “day by day.”

This will save money, speed the restocking time, and create a “greater ability to react at short notice” to contingencies. Bartels was Chief of the Danish armed forces during the Libyan operation.

Bartels spoke shortly after the 2014 NATO Summit in Wales, which expanded on the Connected Force Initiative. CFI seeks to better integrate the NATO militaries and especially their ability to act quickly and jointly. Partners agreed on processes for linking national and NATO exercises and for involving non-NATO partners in those wargames. Sweden and Finland, for example, have signed agreements to work more closely with NATO without actually joining the alliance.

More importantly, though, the Wales summit bolstered the NATO Response Force. NATO Supreme Allied Commander, Europe, USAF Gen. Philip M. Breedlove, speaking at the Air Force Association’s Air & Space Conference in September, said NATO would reassure allies that feel “most threatened” by Russia’s recent land grabs by building up a “high-speed response” element of the NATO Response Force. It will have air, sea, and land components ready to go in five days or less. Breedlove also proposed the creation of a corps-sized element focused on defending any ally “365 days out of the year” in support of NATO’s Article V, which guarantees that an attack on one will be treated as an attack on all. This corps will be responsible for planning for “Article V ... defense actions on a day-by-day basis,” he said.

In countries most threatened, there will be a forward element of NATO planners that will think about how best NATO can defend those countries specifically, and forces will be aligned to fall in on those plans should the need arise, Breedlove reported.

However, “NATO’s budgets are challenged,” Breedlove said. “We will be challenged across the next 10 to 20 years to make the investments we really need to make.” Some of those are “desperately” needed, he said, without offering specific examples.

OUR SURVEY SAID ...

There’s long been a consensus in Washington that the Pentagon’s acquisition system—while it eventually turns out world-class gear—is too expensive and too slow. Especially in an era when the latest technology quickly turns stale, the ponderous acquisition system is increasingly viewed as a liability.

The incumbent head of defense acquisition, technology, and logistics, Frank Kendall, has rolled out a series of initiatives

dubbed “Better Buying Power” versions 1.0-3.0, each concentrating on ways to make the process more efficient. He’s on record as saying he thinks the system isn’t broken, but needs tweaking and relief from time-consuming functions that offer little added value, though they are required by law.

The Senate decided to poll acquisition experts on what they thought needs to be done. In October, the survey was published by the Homeland Security and Government Affairs’ permanent subcommittee on investigations, chaired by Sen. Carl Levin (D-Mich.), who also happens to chair the Senate Armed Services Committee. The list of 31 experts reads like a Who’s Who of Pentagon expertise, including former members of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, former heads of Pentagon acquisition, engineering or program analysis, notable program managers, and outside gurus of defense policy.

“The subcommittee offers no recommendations of its own and endorses no particular expert prescription,” the panel said in releasing the collected essays. But it did note that among the 150 pages or so of expert suggestions, some common themes emerged.

First, half the experts felt there needs to be some “cultural change” in DOD acquisition, and more than two-thirds said there have to be new incentives offered for the workforce.

Christine H. Fox, who recently stepped down as the deputy secretary of defense, noted, “There are no career incentives for acquisition managers to say ... their program is not progressing well, ... is not worth the money, and should be slowed or canceled.”

Two-thirds of the respondents said there have to be big improvements in the recruiting and training of the acquisition workforce.

Almost half said the Pentagon has to do a better job of setting requirements at the outset of a program and that requirements should be tied to expected available funds.

More than half urged stronger accountability and leadership through a weapon system’s life cycle. Several urged that the service Chiefs be further integrated into acquisition.

Another common theme is that program managers aren’t in their positions long enough to see it through to a major milestone or to its successful deployment. Acquisition management also isn’t given the same prestige or career advancement opportunity as line service. Better career paths need to be created.

Air Force acquisition executive William A. LaPlante, speaking at AFA’s Air & Space Conference, said the service’s new 20-year plan puts the service “exactly in line with all the deep thought that’s been put into this area” and indeed reflects much of what was said in the expert survey. USAF has reorganized to give program managers authority over the entire life cycle of their systems—not just procurement or sustainability, but both.

“There is a difference in mentality, when you have to live with what you’re building,” LaPlante said.

The Senate subcommittee made “two observations” about the essays. One is that cultural change “is among both the most important and the least amenable to legislation and policy changes.” Rather, it’s a function of leadership and the incentive structure.

Second, any savings deriving from implementing the suggestions are all for naught if sequestration resumes. Navy acquisition chief Sean J. Stackley said that sequestration will “undo all ... gains in productivity” from acquisition reforms. Jamie M. Morin, former Air Force comptroller and now the head of the DOD’s cost assessment and program evaluation shop, said sequestration has “impaired the stability of nearly every program and caused the department to make decisions damaging many programs both in the short run and long term.” The Pentagon has been unable to plan acquisition strategies because funding levels “continue to fluctuate unpredictably,” he said. ✪