DISPATCH | BY AMIE FERRIS-ROTMAN

The Long Haul

The monumental task of packing up a war.

KABUL

AT THE SPRAWLING Bush Market deep within Afghanistan's capital, the American war is for sale. The maze of some 500 interconnected stores, named for the U.S. president who invaded in 2001, is a chaotic emporium brimming with goods carted in by truck to supply NATO troops. For more than a decade, thousands of vehicles have crossed the border with Pakistan each month, bringing food and supplies that are in turn pilfered, repurposed with price tags, and put on display under the baking sun: Pop-Tarts, Maxwell House coffee canisters, and squeeze bottles of maple syrup, alongside military fatigues, body armor, night-vision goggles, GPS devices, and even some automatic rifles.

Since the end of 2011, when NATO forces began their retreat from the Afghan war zone, turnover from stolen military gear has shot upward, from about $20,000 to $30,000 per month, market managers estimate. One morning in March, Hafizullah Safi surveyed his black market empire from the corrugated iron hut he calls his office. "The Americans won't be here forever," the senior Bush Market manager told me. "But while they are, they're good for business." He clasped the white, wispy beard reaching to the middle of his chest as he looked down on two Afghan traders who were dusting off military-issue Falcon II radios to show to potential customers. Over several warm cans of Mountain Dew, Safi said 70 percent of his market's goods are from trucks and containers belonging to NATO's International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), most of them American. "The more bases shut down," said his young deputy, Ahmad, "the more money we make."

The spike in ISAF gear, though only a tiny fraction of NATO materiel in the country, is a testament to the recent push to remove military equipment from Afghanistan—the United States has some 100,000 containers and 50,000 vehicles in total—leading up to the Dec. 31, 2014, deadline for all foreign combat forces to leave. Estimated to cost $6 billion, the American pullout is a mammoth task—the largest, most complex withdrawal for the U.S. military since World War II—made all the more complicated by Afghanistan's landlocked geography and America's less-than-friendly ties with neighbor countries. Not to mention that the withdrawal of equipment must be timed with the withdrawal of forces, so that enough supplies remain to support those still deployed. The number of U.S. troops, who make up the lion's share of NATO-led forces in Afghanistan, is slated to halve to 34,000 from current levels by February, down from a peak of about 100,000 in 2011.

"From a service component, from a war-fighting perspective, from a green [environmental] perspective, most of this has been worked out," says U.S. Brig. Gen. Steven Shapiro, who until this summer was deputy commander for the U.S.

MASTER SGT. BEN BLOKER/U.S. AIR FORCE

Army unit tasked with removing materiel. He spoke with me at the Kabul headquarters of the 1st Sustainment Command, where the on-site mess hall buzzed with his team of camouflage-clad logisticians. Most of them munched on precooked broccoli and green beans, so-called "operational rations," the latest additions to their diet now that bases are cutting back on kitchen staff. These days, Shapiro's command is ripping down U.S. bases across Afghanistan—about 100 NATO military installations remain out of 800 in late 2011—and sending the metal and unused shipping containers to scrap yards, hoping to boost Afghanistan's tiny steel market. Troops have even started to "eat their way out," he says, forgoing freshly cooked meals for the remaining pile of MREs—high-calorie, vacuum-packed Meals, Ready-to-Eat.

The work isn't glamorous, but war logisticians such as Shapiro like to conjure up grand visions of victory through their ability to tidy up after battle. Contemplating the Afghanistan "retrograde," the U.S. military term for the reverse flow of materiel out of war zones, more than one general quoted to me the words of Gen. Dwight Eisenhower: "You will not find it difficult to prove that battles, campaigns, and even wars have been won or lost primarily because of logistics." A seamlessly executed withdrawal, Shapiro says, is "all part of winning." But after the longest war in America's history, the job won't be easy.

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Compared with Afghanistan, withdrawals from previous U.S. wars were more manageable feats. That is true even of Vietnam, where almost 540,000 U.S. troops were stationed at the war's peak in 1968. Over the next two years, when U.S. troop numbers dropped by 150,000 as part of a planned drawdown, the bulk of their gear was shipped to the U.S. base in Okinawa, Japan, before traveling back home across the Pacific Ocean. Other equipment was housed in depots in the safer parts of southern Vietnam—an option that volatile security makes unthinkable here in Afghanistan.

The Iraq War retrograde, which logisticians feared could go awry, was also pulled off with relative ease. From 2010 to 2011, about 120,000 containers of equipment were driven across the border to U.S. bases in Kuwait, where the supplies could then sit safely for months, if not years, before making their way home on ships. The United States left behind tens of thousands of live-in trailers, but little of military use. In December 2011, the final U.S. troop convoy simply rode across the border under the cover of darkness.

Afghanistan is a different story, given its hostile terrain, unforgiving winters with temperatures that regularly drop well below freezing, and the menace of being landlocked. The country's well-worn reputation as the graveyard of empires is not lost on today's logisticians. The Taliban often point to Britain's catastrophic 1842 defeat in the First Anglo-Afghan War, when all but a handful of Brits were massacred while retreating from Kabul. Although Moscow's 1979 invasion of Afghanistan was a mere road trip through Soviet Central Asia, its exit almost a decade later, over the Soviet-built "Friendship Bridge" connecting Afghanistan and Uzbekistan, was harder to pull off. Withdrawing troop convoys were regularly ambushed while snaking through the Salang Tunnel, the sole passage through the Hindu Kush. The Soviets managed to remove their helicopters and planes, but the decaying superpower left behind as many as half of its armored personnel carriers and tanks, which are still strewn across Afghanistan, frozen in moments of abandonment by fleeing soldiers. Just this past January, a construction crew hit a Soviet tank that was buried underneath ISAF's headquarters in Kabul.

Today, some NATO equipment will intentionally be left behind in Afghanistan as a "gift" for the 352,000-strong Afghan forces, which took charge of the country's security in June. This bequest primarily includes gear desperately needed to detect and dismantle improvised explosive devices, as well as some hardened vehicles, according to Lt. Gen. Nick Carter, who stepped down as ISAF's deputy commander in July to become the British army's commander of land forces. Empty shipping containers, battered vehicles, and the metal skeletons of bases, meanwhile, are destined for local scrap yards. Unlike the Soviets, however, the Americans will take home the bulk of their materiel, including high-value equipment such as MRAPs (mine-resistant ambush-protected vehicles—the sand-colored monstrosities that roam Kabul's streets in trios) and vehicle-mounted artillery used against the Taliban in places such as Kandahar. At Bagram Airfield, an hour north of Kabul, scores of MRAPs sit parked in neat rows, ready for their long journey home to bases and depots across the United States.

For the most part, "Pakistan is the way out," Shapiro says (just as it's been used to ship in materiel during the war). The gear is conveyed initially by truck—traveling approximately 1,000 miles overland from the major bases in southern and

1ST LT. BENJAMIN J. POSTLE/U.S. ARMY; MARK DORAN/U.S. ARMY

eastern Afghanistan, through large, often dangerous swaths of the Pakistani countryside—before reaching the gang-plagued, multicultural metropolis of Karachi on the Arabian Sea. The gear is then loaded onto cargo ships that set sail for the Saudi port of Jeddah and Egypt's Port Said before crossing the Atlantic Ocean to the United States—some 8,300 miles in total.

The trucking and shipping process is managed by U.S. Transportation Command (Transcom), the Defense Department arm that oversees air, land, and sea transport for the military, and Transcom chief William Fraser makes routine trips to Afghanistan from his Illinois headquarters to check on the progress. I spoke with Fraser, a burly, no-nonsense general, on the sprawling grounds of the military section of Kabul's international airport, where several C-5 Galaxy cargo planes, their hulking gray bodies reflecting the sunlight, sat in a row beside the runway. He explained that on an average day, major global shipping firms, such as Singapore-based APL and U.S. logistics giant Supreme Group, submit bids to move equipment from Afghanistan, via Karachi, to its final destination. Once the U.S. military agrees to a price, the contractor hires Pakistani subcontractors—truckers and cleaners—to move the gear and prepare it for voyage.

But relying so heavily on Pakistan has worsened America's logistical headache. Oil tankers are frequently blown up by militants in the country, while other trucks are attacked and robbed, with their cargo making its way to black market vendors like Safi. And agonizingly for the Americans, for seven months starting in late 2011, the Pakistani route was closed, a setback that still chills logisticians. After a U.S. air attack accidentally killed 24 Pakistani soldiers along the border with Afghanistan that November, Islamabad shut the supply lines, abruptly halting all NATO-led convoys coming in and out of Afghanistan. (Expats in Kabul felt the closure's shock waves several months later when we suddenly found ourselves without any bootlegged alcohol.) In July 2012, supply lines were reopened, and the following December, Washington and Islamabad reached a final agreement that kept the routes open in exchange for increased fees from the United States.

While the NATO supply lines were closed, several months' worth of fuel, food, and weapons coming into theater—Fraser estimates about 7,000 shipments in Karachi alone—and military equipment heading out for retrograde piled up at Pakistan's main port and the Torkham border crossing. The blockage has only recently started to clear, Fraser says. The first shipment of materiel to arrive on U.S. shores after the border reopened, a consignment of several containers and vehicles, didn't reach its destination, Jacksonville, Florida, until this past April. "Pre-closure in Pakistan, I want to say we were looking at about 3,500 to 3,600 crossings [across the Afghanistan-Pakistan border] a month," he says. "And we are looking forward to getting back to that level now." He wouldn't say where the figure currently stands.

In conversations with logisticians, diplomats, and even Bush Market's black market traders, the elephant in the room is always the increasingly strained Washington-Islamabad relationship. Just hours before taking office in June, Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif made a point of repeating his demand for an end to U.S. drone strikes, arguing that they undermine Islamabad's sovereignty. The strikes have continued, but Pakistan's proven ability to pull the plug on NATO supply lines means America's fickle ally has some leverage over Washington. Several senior Afghan and Western officials in Kabul and Islamabad told me Pakistan is demanding discounted U.S. military gear in exchange for using its territory. A U.S. State Department official, speaking on condition of anonymity, said such "fire sales" might become an option.

The United States does have ways out of Afghanistan that avoid Pakistan. "We're not putting all our eggs in one basket," Shapiro says.

There are three other exit strategies. "Air direct" allows Transcom to fly materiel directly out of Afghanistan to the United States. Then there is "multimodal," which involves third-party countries and switching between various land, air, and sea routes. Equipment-hauling U.S. Air Force planes are being refueled at a base in Thailand, for example, and ships laden with U.S. materiel have set sail from the Romanian port of Constanta on the Black Sea. American gear is even being transported partway along the 120-year-old Trans-Siberian Railway—whose leather-lined carriages take a week to trudge through the Russian wilderness from Moscow to Vladivostok—before the gear eventually makes its way to Washington state.

The third option is the Northern Distribution Network (NDN), which was originally set up in 2009 to share the burden of transporting supplies with Pakistan and, according to the United States, is one of the world's longest military supply lines. With its long-standing wariness of NATO, Russia does not allow ISAF weapons to cross its territory. But nonlethal gear leaves Afghanistan via former Soviet Central Asian countries and then moves either across the Caspian Sea to Southern Europe or through western Russia, where it travels along the country's vast and sophisticated railways, through Eastern Europe, and into the Baltic states. A single piece of equipment might pass through 10 countries in total. In short, the retrograde is global.

But there's no question that the closure of the Pakistani route turned the withdrawal from a complicated though manageable task into a full-blown logistical nightmare. Using alternate shipping options, such as flying equipment directly to the United States or trucking it across the former Soviet countries north of Afghanistan, ended up costing the Pentagon more than $100 million per month, compared with $17 million to transit through Pakistan, according to the Defense Department. Pentagon requirements and a security situation in permanent flux mean the amount of traffic on the alternate routes is constantly changing, with Fraser and his team jumping across continents to find the cheapest itineraries. Earlier this year, for instance, Transcom said the NDN was carrying about 20 percent of retrograde materiel; according to the Pentagon, that figure had dropped to 4 percent by midsummer.

Although U.S. military officials won't say how much of the retrograde is complete, they insist it is on track. So far, several hundred bases, some accommodating no more than 30 troops, have been transferred to the Afghans. "We're leaving fully functioning base camps for them," Shapiro says. "It's their country, but the T-walls are still erected, the guard towers are still erected, the generators still run." The mood in Kabul, meanwhile, is consumed by the withdrawal: The number of foreign reporters is dwindling, the streets feel more dangerous, and embassies are further fortifying their heavily barricaded compounds as fear of the unknown reverberates throughout the city. At ISAF headquarters in central Kabul, the drawdown is palpable. What was once a manicured, enclosed garden where diplomats, generals, and soldiers lunched at inviting picnic tables is now a shabby, overgrown enclave with wobbly chairs and window frames in desperate need of a paint job. There is an overwhelming sense of the end.

Back at Bush Market, the trader Safi, though disheartened that his business will soon dry up, sees the retrograde as just another chapter in Afghanistan's entanglements with foreign powers. "I am Muslim," he says wistfully, cracking open another can of stolen Mountain Dew. "I believe in God, not America."

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