

More than capability

With the army to be withdrawn from Afghanistan, planning must start on the home bank, argues Araldo Ltd's Director and Principal Consultant John Reeve...

Logisticians will tell you that it is a science, but the recovery of the force from Afghanistan as operations are drawn down is of strategic significance, and decision-makers need to consider many factors in addition to time, distance, weight and volume. Reconstitution of the right capabilities in the UK to enable the army to meet its next set of challenges is key, and must be front and centre in planning the extraction and, crucially, in the prioritisation of lift. Whilst the unit of measure for freight might be pallets or ISO containers, the nature of what constitutes capability is more complex, and prioritisation of the wrong pallet through lack of awareness of this complexity carries significant risk.

Sheer scale, combined with operational pressures and challenging lines of communication mean that management of the reverse supply chain will be of vital importance. Whilst this might be stating the obvious, the scope of the reverse supply chain, those involved and the consequences of getting it wrong are not. The build-up of capability over the last six years has involved many MoD personnel, assets and agencies, as well as industrial expertise, capabilities and logistics. There have been many decisions made at multiple levels, and most of them will have significant bearing on what happens after the operation. Reversing the process is not a simple matter, and the time left to achieve it is considerably less than the six years taken so far for the build-up.

The target outcome of the extraction plan should be the return of personnel and capabilities to the UK and other base locations in good order. This is not about striving for perfection, because – after several years of operational usage with a highly capable enemy and in the most testing environment – nearly all capabilities will require at least some, if not a substantial amount, of recuperation or regeneration. This activity will take time, and understanding the plan for its management is the starting point for determining what should go on the air bridge and when.

This plan is dependent on what the army must do next. Whilst there is uncertainty in organisational structure, basing, infrastructure, policy and funding, it is clear that the army must train and maintain readiness, and it is possible to describe this with reasonable accuracy, albeit without total precision. In the absence of a crystal ball,

this description must be used to drive effective capability planning, and with some urgency. It is thus as important now as it was six years ago that capability managers, DE&S, other MoD stakeholders and industry work together to cost, test and deliver the plan.

Given that the army is currently sustaining a full training cycle for the operation in Afghanistan, it is fair to assume that it has roughly sufficient equipment in its training pool. This means that the operational fleet will exceed the peace time requirement, but it will be needed in a regenerated form for future operational deployments. Management of the fleet, storage, maintenance and recuperation to the right level of readiness will thus be central to the plan. This will require the army and DE&S to agree a new way of working with full industrial engagement.

Until the plan is defined, operational commanders will resist the release of capability from theatre. The danger of this behaviour is that the loading priority for returning aircraft will be those equipments that are deemed to be of less operational value, and it stands to reason that they will be less valuable to the army in the future, too. Whilst the clearance of clutter is an important activity in its own right, it cannot be done at the expense of securing materiel that really matters. This includes key battle-winning equipments and their spares inventories where relevant. The army must therefore give clear direction to the deployed force about its future needs, and operational commanders must start to change their priorities accordingly.

To those on the front line, it may seem strange to base the plan around factors such as peace-time training requirements, industrial capacity, maintenance of inventory and security of supply, but they have been at the forefront in the delivery of capability with which the current campaign is being fought. It is now beholden on all parties to make sure that this capability is ready next time round.

John Reeve
 Director and Principal Consultant
 Araldo Ltd
 Tel: +44 (0)7767 693173
john.reeve@araldo.co.uk
www.araldo.co.uk