Logistics Maneuver

The competitive edge the Marine Corps can't ignore

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> ***"The history of war proves that nine out of ten times an army has been destroyed because its supply lines have been cut off."***
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> ***—GEN Douglas MacArthur, Commander in Chief, U.S. Far East Command***

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The Next Fight Won't Wait on Supplies

During a July 2025 Marine Corps University convocation, the 39th Commandant of the Marine Corps stated that a priority area of study was in contested logistics. This sentiment was reinforced by a representative of the Deputy Commandant for Installations and Logistics, who further clarified the need to solve several pressing problems, including mobilizing, closing the force, and sustaining the force in a contested environment; updating the Marine Corps' concept of employment for prepositioning; and turning the Global Positioning Network into a real capability. These priorities acknowledge a critical juncture in the Marine Corps and U.S. national defense enterprise, particularly in the Pacific, the United States' most consequential theater. The way the Marine Corps and the Joint Force fight will never be the same, and logistics maneuver is critical for success.

Today, the United States faces its first true peer competitor since 1945, capable of operating across each of the instruments of national power.[1] As ADM Paparo stated in his most recent U.S. INDOPACIFIC Command Posture Statement, China's "unprecedented military modernization and increasingly aggressive behavior that threatens the U.S. homeland, our allies, and our partners."[2] Exacerbating this problem, the steadily increasing complexity of the information age, interconnectedness of the global economy and supply web, and shifting geopolitical context portends a significant change to the character of conflict that will likely include disruptions from key aspects of "Made in China 2025" that cannot be ignored—specifically to include disruption of U.S. and DOD logistics, cyberattacks on infrastructure, and denial of access. ("Made in China 2025" details China's goal of exploiting U.S. dependencies across industrial and supply networks by 2035).[3]

Unlike many conflicts of the past, the Marine Corps, as America's naval expeditionary force-in-readiness, cannot rely on uncontested access to the global commons or secure ports, which are currently a critical requirement for the employment of legacy power projection and sustainment capabilities.[4] Instead, future crises and conflicts are increasingly likely to occur in theaters without permissive buildup, contested in every domain, where lines of communication are denied or controlled by an adversary from the outset—and where even CONUS-based installations no longer guarantee garrison-assumed sanctuary.[5] In short, the Marine Corps must execute maneuver across all warfighting functions–to include logistics–as an integrated and offensive capability, ensuring sustainment operations can move, adapt, and persist in contested environments. These contested logistics environments demand a logistics maneuver model that prioritizes mobility, survivability, and innovation to generate reach and tempo against a nuclear-armed, peer competitor that exercises strict authoritarian control over nearly a fifth of humanity.

Contested Sustainment Is the New Norm

In the era of precision fires, information warfare, and multidomain competition, the "rear area" is dead as "contested logistics now occur across deep, close, and rear domains simultaneously."[6] Strategic sealift is vulnerable: according to *Defense Opinion*, the average age of the Maritime Administration's Ready Reserve Fleet is 44 years, with limited self-defense or cyber hardening, and many vessels retired years ago. At a recent activation exercise, only "60% of RRF ships were deemed ready and just 40% sailed on time."[7] Aerial ports like Kadena, Guam, and even CONUS locations like Travis AFB are already targeted in PLA strike modeling.[8] Maritime Preposition Force rotations are predictable, trackable via commercial Automatic Identification System, and visible via open-source satellite systems.[9] Open-source procurement models are supported by unclassified requisitioning systems managed by a heavy footprint of civilians and contractors that can easily be tracked and infiltrated.

Yet today, the Marine Corps continues to plan, train, and deploy with

logistics structures optimized to excel during conflict akin to what was experienced during Desert Storm, wherein access and power projection could occur at a time and place of the United States' choosing. According to a firsthand account, deployed MEUs code repair part backorders as "ABDSHP" (aboard ship)—knowing they will just clear the backlog once they're comfortably ashore. The Marine Corps' legacy approach to logistics is largely contingent upon time, security, and access materializing in the right time and place to sustain operations.[10] The truth is, they will not—and our adversaries have devised systems and strategies to exploit our antiquated approaches to sustainment: adversarial doctrine explicitly notes plans to interdict and paralyze Western logistics at the tactical, operational, and strategic levels.[11]

The "near peer" is watching. They know where the United States stages, how U.S. forces move, and how slowly they react. Exercises like the Unified Pacific Wargame series show that adversaries strike sustainment before fires or maneuver units.[12] The modern (2025) model of Marine Corps logistics is not a support. It is a vulnerability. Unless it becomes a maneuver system, logistics maneuver is a paradigm shift from "trailing the main effort" to "setting the fight's tempo,"—and this can be accomplished now through prepositioning, secure visibility, and access to distributed in-theater nodes.[13]

Logistics Maneuver

In *The Goal*, Goldratt emphasizes the need to manage constraints as "dynamic system elements," identifying that desired effects, not inventory or speed alone, determine real performance. Marines must begin treating logistics this way—fluid, decentralized, and constraint-driven. The Marine Corps must harness the complexity of contested logistics and identify how maneuver within this warfighting function can be leveraged to enable the success of all others through deliberate, dynamic positioning and movement of sustainment capabilities to create advantage. The Marine Corps needs a theory of logistics maneuver that prioritizes speed, dispersion, survivability, and adaptability "to influence an adversary's risk calculations"[14] lest it continue to admire the problem and treat its symptoms rather than the root problem.

Logistics, which encompasses a wide range of activities, resources, and relationships, provides for the physical needs of a force by obtaining, managing, and positioning resources in the correct quantity at the right location at the right time to enable the success of military operations. Ultimately, logistics maneuver provides a joint force commander with the means to facilitate freedom of action, take advantage of an enemy's critical vulnerabilities, protect friendly capabilities, and extend operational reach.

The core components of logistics maneuver are: logistics as an offensive capability; mobility, dispersion, and survivability; decision support tools and innovation; and transformative sustainment architectures.

First, logistics maneuver is not merely a trailing support function; it is an operational necessity in today's conflicts. Sustainment, when guided by an offensive mindset, seizes time and space in the same way that combat units seize terrain. This means that offensive logistics involves positioning fuel, ammunition, maintenance capabilities, and information to create options before the adversary is compelled to respond. It forces the enemy to react to the tempo of sustainment rather than merely responding to needs.

Imagine logistics as a series of light switches and valves—keeping all switches on during campaigning, then selectively operating a few to manage flow during a crisis. The act of switching between these options can be part of a logistics maneuver. This includes across all Services, contracting, and host nation support/acquisition and cross-servicing agreements.

Offensive logistics necessitate forward, mobile, and survivable sustainment nodes that can displace, remain concealed, and reappear at strategically determined locations. It directly integrates into targeting strategies, denying the enemy sustainment through interdiction, supply-chain disruption, and control of critical access points, thereby making offensive logistics a vital shaping operation. This approach sets the conditions for reach, accelerates decision cycles, and maintains initiative across the competition continuum.

Viewing logistics as an offensive capability requires a mindset shift from seeing it solely as a sustainment function to recognizing it as a deliberate offensive action that creates advantages. It should be treated as an enabler equal to fires and maneuver. Commanders must understand how logistics can enhance performance and generate decisive effects similar to targeting. This shift involves moving from "trailing the main effort" to "setting the fight's tempo," achievable through prepositioning, maintaining secure visibility, and ensuring access to distributed in-theater nodes.

Second, in a contested environment, every logistics node becomes a target. Thus, mobility is the first layer of survival. The priority lies in the capacity to rapidly displace by ground, air, sea, and subsurface while preserving the desired operational effects. Dispersion and deception are critical to ensure that no single point of failure can undermine operations.

Mobility, dispersion, and survivability demand low-signature and modular sustainment elements capable of operating from existing and austere locations, shifting within hours, and reconstituting into larger constructs as operations evolve. Movements must be unpredictable, redundant when necessary for deception, and Marines must be capable of obscuring signatures across all domains. Survivability planning cannot be separated from mobility planning—logistics that cannot move are already lost.

By combining dispersion, rapid displacement, and deception, logistics maneuver can endure under fire, support dispersed combat units, and deny the enemy a target. The modern concept of endurance derives from the ability to move rather than store. This includes exploiting additive/subtractive manufacturing and adaptive platforms to reduce reliance on vulnerable supply lines.

Third, logistics maneuver relies on decision support tools to influence com-

mand decision cycles and enhance clarity despite complexity. This can now be enabled by secure dashboards capable of integrating existing data points in the Integrated Data Environment/Global Combat Support System-Marine Corps, and Defense Logistics Agency–Troop Support, focused on packages, capabilities, and manpower constraints in realtime. The goal is rapid, informed decision making that keeps sustainment operations relevant and responsive. This approach requires a renaissance of discovery learning, inspired by historical examples such as the sustained flow of munitions in Hue City despite cut-off routes; DESERT SHIELD, which demonstrated that mass without momentum stalls progress; Task Force 58 in Afghanistan, which showed that sustainment can project combat power hundreds of miles inland; and the COVID-19 pandemic, which revealed the fragility of centralized supply chains and sparked *Force Design 2030's* distributed sustainment model.

The Marine Corps must prioritize effects over mere throughput—ensuring that Marines, particularly at the O-3 level and below, are trained and empowered to utilize 3D printing or field repairs when sufficient to save lives and sustain operational tempo. Factors such as energy availability, material choice, and location are critical: a metal option in the weapons engagement zone or a durable polymer can be decisive. A tiered manufacturing approach—from producing high-demand, easy-to-make parts forward, to more complex items as a backstop outside of the weapons engagement zone—turns sustainment into a maneuver asset.

Material solutions are crucial for effective sustainment. A modern sustainment network must be opportunistic, leveraging every available resource to keep the joint force relevant. This includes integrating prepositioned stocks, support from allied and partner nations, field ordering officer authority, and local foraging into a single adaptive concept that generates sustainment from both planned and improvised sources.

Fourth, transformative sustainment architectures must prioritize reconstituting the force during and after disruptions. This requires shifting from a static map of assets to a dynamic and integrated sustainment system.

When necessary, this network should be able to transition to submerged capabilities and subsurface distribution. The goal is not simply to move supplies faster; rather, it is to enable more locations, diverse patterns, and various platforms to sustain the fight, allowing the Joint Force to flex, adapt, and regenerate under pressure.

What Industry Learned the Hard Way

Amazon revolutionized global logistics—especially in the aftermath of disruptions like Katrina and the 2011 tsunami—by embedding artificial intelligence-driven warehouse routing, predictive demand models, and modular staging to sustain operational speed. As noted in *Logistics Viewpoints*, "Amazon has integrated artificial intelligence throughout its supply chain to improve demand forecasting, logistics, and inventory management.[15]" Similarly, a *C-DO Times* case study emphasizes how artificial intelligence-powered demand forecasting, robotics, and optimized routing position Amazon to quickly adapt to disruptions.[16]

DHL developed Resilience360 in response to delivery failures during crises such as the 2011 Japanese tsunami. Today, it is capable of rerouting packages in realtime by considering thousands of variables, including geopolitical, environmental, and cyber events.[17]

Maersk shifted from fixed shipping schedules to a globally adaptive, risk-aware container network after experiencing piracy and cyberattacks, notably the NotPetya incident in 2017. The company now utilizes digital twins to model logistics movements and adjust routes based on risk and availability.[18]

When a consumer package can navigate contested shipping lanes more reliably than a Marine rifle squad, the issue lies not in funding, but in mindset.

The Marine Corps Can't "Figure Out" Logistics Later

In the next fight, logistics is the opening salvo—and the last shot fired. *Aboard ship* is a symptom of deeper thinking failures and a general failure of innovation and initiative. If Marines cannot close and maneuver a force, the probability of achieving objectives is low. Worse: if they can't sustain those forces and persist once deployed, they are merely gambling with American blood and treasure.

The initial publication of *FMFM 1, Warfighting,* in 1989, served as a demarcation line for the Corps in its adoption of a warfighting philosophy oriented on maneuver warfare. Unlike attrition warfare, maneuver aims to circumvent obstacles and threats, and attack from positions of advantage, exploiting fleeting opportunities, and achieving leverage of strengths against weaknesses. Ultimately, through a philosophy of maneuver warfare, one aims to incapacitate an enemy system and collapse the will to resist. Success in maneuver is often disproportionate to the effort made, making a theory of logistics maneuver both appealing in a resource-constrained, contested environment, but also opening an opportunity to view logistics as an option for maneuver.[19] After all, one must look beyond the narrow paradigms placed upon logistics and sustainment as an enabling function and recognize the potential for logistics as an option for maneuver, if not the main effort during assurance, deterrence, and response to a wide range of contingencies.[20]

To prevail today, the Marine Corps must reconceptualize logistics because a force that doesn't have the means to fight, which sustainment provides, is irrelevant. Logistics is not merely a function of sustainment but a critical source of advantage. The Marine Corps must reconceptualize logistics as a source of maneuver potential rather than a warfighting function that exists solely to support or enable all others.

Logistics is the pacing function that dictates the operational reach–the distance and duration across which a force can employ military capacities—and it extends the culminating point of military forces. As Napoleon witnessed during his trials and tribulations in Russia, the will of an opponent with superior combat power can be broken without a fight (even after seizing

a capital); however, an expeditionary force cannot operate abroad without a sustainment system with sufficient capability and capacity to satisfy critical requirements and flexibility to adapt to changing conditions in an operational environment. Even better, unlike many of the warfighting functions, it is one of the few that can deter an adversary, providing a potential path to winning without fighting, which is undoubtedly the most cost-effective and least damaging outcome for all parties involved.

Notes

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>This article was written following the AY25–26 Marine Corps University Convocation Ceremony—it is a thought model—and call to action for the logistics-type (and infantry) academics attending professional military education in AY25–26.