DEEP Into Kazakhstan

Developing a Western Operational Logistics Course

BY GEORGE TOPIC AND ROBERT BREWER

Operational logisticians are in high-demand across the globe, irrespective of country, since their specialty is a critical enabler of military capability. It is difficult, however, to design relevant training and to develop the next generation of logisticians who are skilled in the art of planning and managing logistics at the operational level. Within the U.S. Department of Defense (DOD) the questions of what to teach, how to optimize student learning, and even who to teach are all difficult to answer—across the armed services and joint organizations there is very little agreement. Coursework design for other nations must accommodate differences in culture, language, and teaching methodology from that of the United States, and relate instruction to the host country’s national security strategy and defense priorities.

In 2014, the Kazakhstan Defense Ministry requested assistance from the United States and NATO in developing a Western operational logistics course for a graduate degree program at their National Defense University (KNDU) that had the support of the President of Kazakhstan. Educators from KNDU, NATO, and the United States have since produced an effective course that will enhance the development of Kazakh logisticians for many years to come. For those contemplating the possibility of undertaking such an initiative, our experience can assist in the effort and prevent pitfalls. Make no mistake—even under the best circumstances with highly motivated and talented leaders, this is a challenging undertaking but a great investment.

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Course Content

This project was executed under the auspices of a unique collaborative program known as the Defense Education Enhancement Program, or DEEP. The Program is designed to support military education and development efforts in partner nations—an estimated 20 countries, principally members of the NATO Partnership for Peace (PfP) Consortium—and draws upon the voluntary time commitment of faculty members and experts at U.S. and NATO partner military and civilian institutions.

When this project started in November of 2014, neither the KNDU faculty nor the U.S.–NATO assistance team had more than the vaguest idea of what the Kazakh Defense Ministry envisioned or needed. The KNDU faculty was not familiar with much of the material taught in Western institutions and the DEEP team was unfamiliar with Kazakhstani military logistics, their organizational structure and processes, or even the status of U.S.–Kazakh logistics engagement efforts. Consequently, the first of four weeklong meetings at KNDU in Astana, Kazakhstan was spent framing course objectives, requirements, structure, and pedagogy. A broad array of potential subject areas was developed, which we ultimately narrowed down to six subjects that overlap and reinforce one another during this weeklong (45 hour) course:

- planning and managing joint logistics operations;
- supply chain management;
- life cycle systems management (total cost of ownership);
- comparative analysis of NATO/Western logistics;
- deployment and expeditionary logistics;
- humanitarian assistance and disaster relief logistics.

Course Development

The course is part of a graduate degree program, so teaching methods and assessments were important considerations. We proposed—and KNDU accepted—a plan that included lectures, seminars, case studies, academic problems, a table top exercise, and even a field trip to a local commercial firm.

Providing reference material, readings, and teaching resources was a major undertaking for our team. Prominent western books and articles, case studies, and even a relatively old but excellent supply chain management textbook were great resources. As was the Russian edition of the *NATO Logistics Handbook* and relatively recent documents from Russian sources.

Innovation in instructional methodology is rarely easy, but attempting to transform pedagogy from the “Soviet style” to one based on modern Western techniques is a special challenge. While the KNDU faculty was anxious to use case studies and Socratic teaching methods, this is a new skill for most of their instructors. Additionally, encouraging students to challenge one another or especially higher-ranking faculty was not always met with success.

The second and third trips to Astana essentially continued with enhanced dialogue not only with the faculty and students of KNDU but also, significantly, with a number of senior officers from the service headquarters and Defense Ministry. Their
participation was crucial insofar as it enabled us to frame the academic issues around real-world, relevant challenges and requirements. Moreover, the mutual support of the operational and academic organizations will pay off in many ways. One obvious benefit is the development of student research projects that can have tangible benefit to the Kazakhstan Defense Forces.

In addition to working on the course design, the DEEP team was also requested to teach a series of “master classes” for both the faculty and students. This was especially valuable, as it gave us an opportunity to assess the effectiveness of both course material and our recommended teaching techniques. The strong and consistent support of NATO’s Multinational Logistics Coordination Center was not only important, but was also enthusiastically received. Czech Army Colonel (ret.) Roman Dufek—one of NATO’s premier logisticians—presented several classes that were of great interest to faculty and students alike. Additionally, his briefings generated a number of insightful questions that significantly improved the overall course design. Kazakhstani logisticians also more easily related to NATO examples as they included countries that have transformed towards Western logistics methods and are on a more relatable scale than DOD. The importance of the U.S.–NATO partnership in this program cannot be overstated.

In the spring of 2016, after the third meeting in Astana, KNDU faculty were able to make two visits to the United States. Their trips included a multinational logistics conference at U.S. Army Fort Lee, and a series of activities at the National Defense University, Defense Logistics Agency, and Army Logistics University. They were able to sit in logistics classes, observe wholesale distribution operations, and interact with a variety of faculty and logisticians. These visits proved very fruitful, as they were able to witness firsthand what and how we teach, as well as the implications of our courses for U.S. and NATO logistics operations. After these visits, KNDU faculty also felt confident that they would be able to successfully execute their pilot western operational logistics course.

The most recent DEEP visit to Kazakhstan in September 2016 allowed the team to observe and participate in the delivery of the pilot course. Additionally, the KNDU–DEEP team was able to refine and enhance the course and work on a couple of key gaps that required additional focus. During this visit, one serendipitous opportunity came up as part of a coincidental discussion with the General Staff representatives about Kazakhstan’s recent deployment of an estimated 500 soldiers to England for Exercise Steppe Eagle in July 2016. The challenges they faced—and ultimately overcame—were classic examples associated with any major international deployment. We have since included a related case study in the curriculum which, judging from student interest thus far, is certain to become one of the most important components of the entire course.

The fourth visit is envisioned to be the last “formal” engagement for this project, but by no means the end of the support and the partnership between all of the participants. U.S. and NATO representatives will continue to provide material, field questions, and seek out opportunities to assist KNDU.
Considerations

Each program, project, and initiative is unique and must be tailored to produce the best possible outcomes for our partners with the time and resources available. Political, cultural, economic, and bureaucratic influences are but a few of the exogenous factors that will affect the planning and execution of such engagements.

The most important consideration is perhaps the most obvious—that the relationship between the “customer” and the “provider” is paramount. All parties need to be as clear as possible on requirements, and communications need to be as open, clear, and direct as possible. In our dealings with KNDU, for example, all communications apart from face-to-face contact were passed through at least two intermediaries that made coordination quite cumbersome. There are many reasons why shortfalls might exist, not the least of which is changes to guidance or priorities that occur during the execution of a project which typically require a couple of years to complete. Flexibility, adaptability, and empathy on all sides are important attributes of a successful multinational education program.

Closely related to this is the importance of consistency; relationships built during multiple visits exponentially increase effectiveness. This proved especially true when KNDU faculty were able to visit the United States. While it is difficult to secure a long-term commitment from academics or anyone to make several visits to a distant partner nation, the payoff is significant. This is especially true when you are executing such a program using essentially volunteer labor.

A third area of special emphasis is the linkage between the military academic communities and the operational forces. In many countries this relationship is tenuous and in some cases almost nonexistent—even in the United States and NATO we often struggle to keep this connection strong. We worked hard to encourage the operational staffs to join us for each of our sessions at KNDU, and they attended almost every one: that greatly enhanced the outcomes. Conversely, the Defense Ministry staffs have recently offered to include KNDU logistics faculty in future exercises, operational efforts, and planning activities. It should also be noted that in fall 2017, KNDU will solicit feedback from military commands regarding their spring logistics course graduates to ensure that the course met the requirements of the operational force; updates will be made as necessary.

Another challenging but important objective for effective education engagements is to work on the institutional or defense institution building (DIB) aspects of those subjects being taught. For U.S.-sponsored projects such as DEEP, in many cases there is a complementary DIB effort also working in or with the partner country. Integration or at minimum coordination of these efforts, helps to develop leaders who have a broad perspective and a deep understanding of how to think about systems, processes, and managing change in a strategic context. One caution—it is imperative that visiting faculty do not interfere or involve themselves in operational or strategic debates within the host country. External subject matter experts are often very highly regarded and an offhand comment, poorly informed
assessment, or even simple misunderstanding can have a significant impact.

Programs like DEEP are collective efforts and offer opportunities for all participants. Our team learned a great deal from our work with the Kazakhstan defense forces, and we are confident that we helped KNDU produce a course that will prove valuable for their logisticians. As a collateral benefit—much of the material we developed with our Kazakh partners can easily be tailored for use by and with other nations.

The most important outcome from programs such as this is the sense of partnership and relationship building engendered by the process. In this instance, there are opportunities for a significant increase in logistics engagements, a revitalization of the professionalization initiative for logisticians, and the development of a mutually beneficial long-term logistics partnership. We are hopeful that our work together will foster even more involvement in the PfP Consortium and help establish Kazakhstan as one of the PfP leaders for logistics.

As we reflect, it is also important to help ensure that such efforts are tightly woven into the overall plans of the Combatant Commands including the U.S. Transportation Command, Special Operations Command, and others as well as the Office of the Secretary of Defense, and the Joint Staff. Additionally, we need to ensure we are working in concert with the U.S. Department of State—the in-country teams as well as the regional and functional bureaus in Washington. This is easier said than done and requires many players to share information and synchronize efforts. Finally, our work with other (host) nations ought to be complementary to the work of our partner nations with those host nations. There admittedly is room for improvement in this area, which mostly reflects how structures and processes have evolved for different purposes. It is clear to everyone who works in the international arena that we must take full advantage of every engagement opportunity, and leverage every possible connection, to assist our friends and allies around the world.

All those who support such programs—not just the faculty but also those who provide administrative, planning, and coordination support—contribute to efforts that can have significant strategic impacts. The team of professionals at the PfP Consortium, the NATO staff, the contributing schools, and many other organizations all deserve great praise for their efforts to make a difference and build a safer and more secure future for all our nations. The result of all this hard work is a win for everybody.