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The Frontier Post

US begins packing its Afghan war gear for the Movers

August 5, 2012

It has taken the United States years to amass the mountains of gear piled up at huge bases like Camp Leatherneck in southern Afghanistan. As the war here draws to a close and the American military begins to reduce its forces, it also has to send back most of its equipment, an immense logistics effort already under way and spanning half the globe.

The international military mission here still has almost two and a half years before the 2014 withdrawal deadline, and commanders hesitate to discuss openly the details of what is known as the “retrograde” of equipment back to the United States.

The issue is freighted with sensitivities about the United States’ commitment to Afghan security. American commanders do not want to give the Taliban any sense they are already giving up on the fight.

Officials admit that imagery is also a factor. Even as they make decisions about what to pack up, what to leave behind for Afghan forces, or what to abandon or destroy, they want to avoid any echo of the Soviets’ headlong rush out of Afghanistan in the late 1980s, which left the countryside strewn with rusting tanks and guns.

In any case, though, troops are already departing, and military planners are carefully calculating how to extricate the equipment smoothly. In all, officials estimate, they will have to wrangle 100,000 shipping containers of material and 45,000 to 50,000 vehicles like tanks and Humvees from all across Afghanistan. The New York Times in a report said on Saturday.

That is all complicated by the greater expense, and security risk, of shipping things out of Afghanistan, given that fighting is still expected even as the withdrawal takes place.

After Pakistan closed its border in November to protest a coalition airstrike that killed 24 of its soldiers, the Marines have mostly flown excess equipment out at a rate of 18 to 24 flights a day. These went directly to the United States or to ports in Kuwait, Oman or elsewhere on the Arabian Peninsula, from which they continued by ship.

Since Pakistan reopened its borders last month, roads south to Karachi are likely to take the greatest weight of future outbound traffic. Once a backlog of supplies on the route clears north into Afghanistan, about 100 trucks carrying excess equipment are expected to leave Afghanistan daily for Pakistan.

Land routes north through Central Asia and Russia, called the northern distribution network, are likely to be another important exit route for American forces stationed farther north in Afghanistan and for European coalition partners. But the winding road routes, the complicated rail gauges and the greater potential for attack and logjam make them less attractive than the Pakistani route.

The Afghan government's Base Closure Commission takes recommendations from NATO and the Afghan Army to determine which bases to shutter and which the Afghans can run for themselves.

According to a timetable set by President Obama, the United States is to withdraw about 23,000 troops from Afghanistan by October, leaving about 68,000 American troops. There are about 13,000 Marines, down from about 20,000, and the United States has said publicly that this number should fall to around 7,000 by October. Coalition levels in the southwest will be bolstered by the arrival of a second battalion from the Georgian Army.

KABUL (INP): It has taken the United States years to amass the mountains of gear piled up at huge bases like Camp Leatherneck in southern Afghanistan. As the war here draws to a close and the American military begins to reduce its forces, it also has to send back most of its equipment, an immense logistics effort already under way and spanning half the globe. The international military mission here still has almost two and a half years before the 2014 withdrawal deadline, and commanders hesitate to discuss openly the details of what is known as the "retrograde" of equipment back to the United States.

The issue is freighted with sensitivities about the United States' commitment to Afghan security. American commanders do not want to give the Taliban any sense they are already giving up on the fight. Officials admit that imagery is also a factor. Even as they make decisions about what to pack up, what to leave behind for Afghan forces, or what to abandon or destroy, they want to avoid any echo of the Soviets' headlong rush out of Afghanistan in the late 1980s, which left the countryside strewn with rusting tanks and guns. In any case, though, troops are already departing, and military planners are carefully calculating how to extricate the equipment smoothly. In all, officials estimate, they will have to wrangle 100,000 shipping containers of material and 45,000 to 50,000 vehicles like tanks and Humvees from all across Afghanistan.

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