

Ret. General Paul Kern
What Happens Next – 04.17.2022

Ret. General:

I am glad that people are paying attention to logistics and its impact on warfare. That is something that is a strength of the US and a failure in Russia.

Larry Bernstein:

Where do we Americans excel with logistics that separates us from the other great military powers?

Ret. General Paul Kern:

Number one, almost all of our wars in the last 100 years have been overseas from the United States; therefore, we have to plan how to support ourselves, get there, and plan how to support ourselves in that new location, could be in the Pacific, in the Atlantic, but we don't know.

Second, is that you need to look at the structure that we put together, we have a whole command called TRANSCOM that's nothing but logistics. That's a major command, just like CENTCOM is for the Middle East or EUCOM is for Europe. Third, and maybe the most important, is our logisticians in the US have an ethos that says we will not let the war fighters fail. In the past when people have run out of bullets or fuel, that's been something which we earned the lessons the hard way. We said, "We're not going to do that again."

Larry Bernstein:

We don't fight wars with contiguous countries like Canada. What advantage does that have for Russia, given that it lacks logistical capabilities?

Ret. General Paul Kern:

One of the principles of warfare that gives you an advantage is interior lines. The border that they have is contiguous to the place they're fighting, so they don't have to cross into enemy territory to support as they own it. It should be a significant advantage for them. And Belarus I consider an adjunct to Russia itself, no different, so the interior lines applies whether they're in Belarus or in Russia.

Larry Bernstein:

The Ukrainians are resupplied by NATO, with its contiguous border in Eastern European NATO countries. How will the Ukrainian resupply work given that it is in a war zone and its supply lines are being harassed?

Ret. General Paul Kern:

I think you've already seen that. One of the first attacks was on the major airport outside of Kyiv. *The Russians* had assumed that they could take that down. They didn't expect the fight that they got when they were there. And they also then had a long line back to the border to

keep it supported. But the advantage of interior lines, applies to the NATO border countries. And we have been able to conduct resupply to those borders.

That does not stop Russia from attacking as they have done it.

Larry Bernstein:

In Ukraine does resupply accomplished by rail, truck, boat or air?

Ret. General Paul Kern:

The answer is by all. Rail is the way that the Russians prefer to do it, but rails are easily defined and attacked. Road networks you have to plan for convergence of those intersections. And sea, with the exception of Odessa, Russia has managed to block off most of the sea lanes into Ukraine. But you don't choose one, you choose as many as you possibly can.

Sometimes we do it by air drop.

Larry Bernstein:

Can you get significant amounts of material dropped by air or is that too limiting?

Ret. General Paul Kern:

No, we do it all the time. We have aircraft designed to refuel from the air. And we also have ordinary aircraft that can go anywhere. They can sling load supplies as well as carry supplies internally. It's an area which we plan for multiple avenues to support operations and not just one or the other. But air is a very significant part of it.

Larry Bernstein:

President Biden made an announcement that he was not going to engage US troops in the war zone. Who is flying those planes?

Ret. General Paul Kern:

We can bring the supplies into those countries and then have Ukrainians come in and pick it up, so we avoid entering into the war zone.

Larry Bernstein:

What caused Russia's 40-mile supply column backup?

Ret. General Paul Kern:

I was very surprised that they would get themselves in that kind of a position. When you have a column of armored vehicles and then you have wheeled vehicles behind it in the winter, even on hard surface roads with icy conditions, you have problems. And the same thing is true on the muddy roads that they got stuck in. Tracks have a better capability than wheels in most cases, but they were getting all of them stuck. It was very poor planning in using the transportation routes. They didn't appear to have any alternatives that would have alleviated some of those problems.

I can add to that the great fighting that the Ukrainians conducted against these lines. They saw that as a vulnerability and they attacked it.

Larry Bernstein:

What happens to an armored column that is under attack that is literally stuck in the mud?

Ret. General Paul Kern:

They are predominantly stuck because the conditions off the roads were very muddy and once you run a few tracks vehicles through you make it worse. And then the wheeled vehicles find it impossible to get through. Finding a different route out of the road was a challenge.

Larry Bernstein:

The Russians have retreated back home to resupply, will they improve their logistics on their reentry into Ukraine.

Ret. General Paul Kern:

The answer is yes. But also expect Ukrainians to better as well. They learned lessons at the same time. The terrain is very different in the east in the Donbass region all the way down to the Crimea, which they're going to try to link up there. It's an area which the Ukrainians have been fighting in as contested area for many years now. So, they know the terrain and how to fight in that area. Both sides will be learning from the past. And it's a different terrain in terms of being stuck on single roads that the Russians I'm sure will avoid. But at the same time, it opens up other vulnerabilities from different modes of attack.

Larry Bernstein:

You mentioned the problems with icy roads and mud. We are in mid-April and the weather will be improving. Does warmer weather improve the attacker's supply lines?

Ret. General Paul Kern:

Yes, it will. It gives them some advantages. We expect that once you get out of the thaw, it's better. They still have rain to deal with. The Dnieper River creates one big boundary.

All military planning considers weather, but the other is the mission, enemy, the troops, the terrain, all have to be considered in the time you have available.

Larry Bernstein:

Experts have said that the two things that the Ukrainians most desperately need is more ammunition and more armored vehicles. Is that something that's easy to resupply?

Ret. General Paul Kern:

Well, supply chains are always a challenge. I take nothing for granted. Ammo is heavy. They need ammo, fuel, water, medical supplies. All of those have to be accounted for in this next

phase on both sides. They've seen what their consumption rates are and they should know better as they plan for the next phase.

Larry Bernstein:
Who has the edge with logistics?

Ret. General Paul Kern:
Russia has a long supply line which has not been attacked behind it. And that supply line remains intact, whereas Ukraine has been under constant attack for some years now. So, their supply lines have been broken up and they knew how to fight through it, but it's still under attack, while Russia supply line has not.

Larry Bernstein:
Can NATO help Ukraine with logistics planning and execution?

Ret. General Paul Kern:
They've been studying Russian tactics and vulnerabilities for some time now. NATO has been giving them insights into what the Russians are planning to do. And they have an opportunity to be forewarned and not be surprised and that gives them an advantage as well.

Larry Bernstein:
Russia has been unable to achieve air superiority? How important is air superiority for resupply and logistics?

Ret. General Paul Kern:
Well, in modern warfare you look at it from a combined operations, air, land and sea. On land, you use indirect fliers, missile fires, all the capabilities and you provide your air defenses. It's an integration of all of these capabilities that gives you the real advantage. Russia has not been able to do that. In previous, earlier battles inside Ukraine, prior to 2014, they were pretty good at it. They seem to have failed to learn their own lessons.

Larry Bernstein:
Are both sides using drones?

Ret. General Paul Kern:
Russians have significant amounts of drones and have used them very effectively.

And Ukraine has, with support from NATO countries, been able to use drones effectively. And we're giving them new capabilities, we'll call them the suicide drones, that can loiter and attack their columns.

Larry Bernstein:
It has been 20 years since the Iraq War, how has technology changed the nature of war since then?

Ret. General Paul Kern:

Armor today is much more capable. The vulnerability as you've noted, has been the top attack, and that's been one of the real keys to both the Javelin and the NLAW that the UK has provided to use top attack, which is the weak point against armored vehicles.

We have significant air defenses. Very clever radars that we can track and move our weapons to follow. But they also can be jammed. And so electronic warfare is a modern part of the battle as well. It's always been there, but it's significant in today's battles. Russia has been modern communications. And we use very different communications. Satellite observance, satellite both for reconnaissance and for communications has been around for a while but is a big player in today's wars.

Larry Bernstein:

NATO is considering giving advanced equipment to the Ukrainian army that is untrained in using them. Can the Ukrainians be properly trained to use these weapons?

Ret. General Paul Kern:

Well, one of the things you've seen is, there's a transfer of the S300, which is a former Soviet air defense system to Ukraine. We're giving Ukrainians systems that they know how to employ.

We're trying to not give them something that they've never seen before, but we also have brought training for things like the Javelin and the NLAW to them.

Larry Bernstein:

How do you see this war playing out in the next few months?

Ret. General Paul Kern:

It's gonna be ugly. It's gonna be lessons learned on both parts. It's going to be a continuation of the civilians caught in the war fighting. We've always concerned about the use of chemical, biological or nuclear weapons. That escalation would be a major turning point which would really put us on the edge of a major long-term war. I don't think Russia is going to be able to just walk in and defeat Ukraine very rapidly.

Larry Bernstein:

We've heard estimates of 7000 Russian soldiers killed and 30,000 wounded or 15% of the active soldiers. How does this affect their fighting force? Anthony King says a unit with over 30% casualties is incapable of offensive actions.

Ret. General Paul Kern:

Logistics has to account for casualties by providing medical resources and evacuation of personnel. And then you have to reconstitute units which are below the 30% reduction. The logistics plan is how do you reconstitute and evacuate casualties and equipment, rebuild and get it back into the fight.

Larry Bernstein:

Ukrainians have untrained volunteers. How can volunteers help?

Ret. General Paul Kern:

It is difficult to get people to be fully trained in a short period of time, but they can become effective. We've seen during World War One, World War Two, training can be done in a very quick, rudimentary way. When you have to prepare people for casualties, it's hard to train for that. And that's why we make our training very stressful. You want to induce those stresses in people before without hurting them. But the mental stress has a way of replicating some of those experiences.

Larry Bernstein:

What about using untrained volunteers to assist with logistics and away from the battlefield?

Ret. General Paul Kern:

Absolutely. If you go back and look at World War Two that's what we did. We took people who had the capability in their commercial jobs and that's the jobs we aligned them with in the military. Not 100%, but that's what our goals were, to, to do that. So, you take advantage of that.

Larry Bernstein:

I end each episode on a note of optimism. What are you optimistic about?

Ret. General Paul Kern:

I'm optimistic about Ukrainians. They have shown a will to fight, they've shown a capacity to fight a superior technically and by numbers force, and win. I'm just absolutely positive that we'll see that to continue, and I expect Russia to continue to suffer because of it.